

Give Hamas Nothing for Free

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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During my years of trying to negotiate peace between Israel and its neighbors, I was struck by how rarely the two sides were in sync. Unfortunately, that pattern is holding today. At a time when both the Israelis and Palestinians are experiencing political earthquakes, the two sides appear poised for far-reaching change -- but in different directions.

Israel now has a very broad centrist consensus -- probably for the first time since David Ben-Gurion was prime minister -- and the public seems ready to disengage from the Palestinians, withdraw extensively from the West Bank and get out of Palestinian lives. Ariel Sharon may have shaped the consensus, or he may simply have understood that it existed and needed a leader to guide it. His natural successor, Ehud Olmert, appears determined to follow his path.

By contrast, the Palestinians have now voted to remake the Palestinian Authority by electing Hamas, a group that rejects the very concept of peace with the Israelis -- or even a negotiated divorce from the Israelis, which is what disengagement is really all about.

With 77 percent of Israelis in a poll believing even before the Palestinian elections that there was no Palestinian partner for peace, Hamas's stunning victory may only reinforce the Israeli impulse toward unilateral separation. The problem, of course, is that separation or disengagement is not a simple proposition, especially when it comes as to the West Bank. Unlike Gaza, where the distances from major Israeli cities are significant, the West Bank is so close as to breed serious Israeli security concerns. Can Israel be sure that short-range Qassam rockets won't be fired from the West Bank at its cities and communities? Will Israel, even if it takes the very painful step of evacuating settlements from a significant part of the West Bank, preserve either a military presence or a readiness for rapid intervention to preempt terrorist attacks from Palestinian areas?

Though recognizing that the answers to these questions are complicated, the Israelis are likely to proceed anyway, given the public's desire to resolve demographic problems and shape both its borders and its future without letting either be held hostage to Palestinian dysfunction or outright rejection.

While Hamas's instinct may be to avoid any cooperation with Israel, it will find that governing presents dilemmas. Israel supplies Palestinian electricity and water, and it collects taxes and customs revenue that provide much of the money needed for the Palestinian administration. And Israel controls nearly all access into and out of Palestinian areas.

Hamas must face one other reality: It ran, and won, on a platform of reform and delivery of a better life. But life is not likely to be improved unless Hamas has the "quiet" it needs to reconstruct society -- which will require dealing with chronic corruption and lawlessness, providing social services and developing an economy that offers jobs and promise for the future. When its leaders declare that Hamas will create a new social policy, a new health policy, and a new economic and industrial policy, they raise expectations. Can they deliver on them if they are at war with Israel?

The external Hamas leaders, such as Khaled Meshaal in Damascus, will push for a return to violence soon, especially with their backers in Iran urging this course and perhaps tying increased funding to it. Internal leaders such as Mahmoud Zahar and Ismael Haniyeh, who live in Gaza and have to deal with the daily realities of life, may have very different priorities. While joining in the rejection of Israel, they may seek at least an indirect dialogue with the Israelis to preserve calm and to see what Israel can do for them. As Zahar has already said, "If Israel has anything to bring the Palestinian people, we will consider this. But we are not going to give anything for free."

The Israeli position (and the international community's as well) should be a mirror of that posture: Hamas gets nothing for free. It has to prove it will change. It may want quiet for its own needs, but it will try to use this necessary "calm" to get recognition from the outside and goods from the Israelis.

It may be that both Hamas and the Israelis will find a de facto relationship useful. Israel gains calm and proceeds to complete the separation barrier. Hamas has the freedom to focus on internal reconstruction. Sounds logical, but it's sustainable only if Hamas desists from building and amassing Qassam rockets and bombs, prevents terrorist attacks by Islamic Jihad and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and stops the smuggling of new and improved weapons into Gaza and the West Bank.

Israel will not go along with a "calm" that gives Hamas all the benefits and yet requires nothing of it. Calm punctuated by acts of terrorism (and a buildup of capability for even greater acts of terrorism later on) would mean no calm to the Israelis. They will act to preempt attacks and any buildup of the terrorist infrastructure. Meanwhile, it can be assumed that Hamas will seek to do the minimal and gain the maximal.

But it must not be let off the hook.

Hamas cannot be allowed to avoid making choices. Any hope of seeing this Palestinian party transformed by the realities of having to govern will fade if its ideologists can show that change is unnecessary. At some point, Israel may let some non-Hamas Palestinians act as go-betweens to see whether a de facto relationship is possible, but Israel's terms will be clear, particularly on security.

The United States must be no less clear on what Hamas has to do if it is to have a relationship with the international community. Hamas will want to have it both ways: having relations with the greater world while preserving its fundamental doctrine of rejection of Israel and support for violence. But no half-measures or vague formulations are acceptable. Hamas must recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, reject violence and be obliged to stop all acts of terrorism. The U.S. role must be to forge a consensus on these conditions and ensure they are not eroded over time. In the end, what happens at a de facto level between Israel and Hamas will be one thing. What the international community insists on must be another.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H.W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *The Missing Peace*.



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