

Keep up the Pressure on Hamas

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Since its parliamentary victory in the West Bank and Gaza last week, the militant Islamic organization Hamas seems to expect that the international community will provide it with diplomatic support and hundreds of millions of dollars in aid without requiring any change in its commitment to Israel's destruction. Hamas, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, judging from its statements, understands that if it can win international support for business as usual, this will mean success in its strategy to sharply lower the bar and allow its extreme ideas to gradually enter the mainstream of civilized discourse.

For example, it would mean that targeting innocent Israeli civilians would be accepted if it is called "resistance" and that not recognizing Israel's existence -- which has been a prerequisite for Palestinians to win broader international approval -- would be tolerated.

When Hamas says the most that can be hoped for is a truce if Israel yields to all of Hamas' demands, even this idea of peace may be deemed too ambitious. This must not be tolerated.

Further, a soft international stance on Hamas would break faith with Palestinian moderates, who repeatedly lectured radicals that a refusal to recognize Israel's existence would guarantee the Palestinians pariah status.

If there is no pressure for Hamas to make tough decisions, the moderates will be severely marginalized. The pressure to make hard choices is aimed not only at hardcore ideologues who may not yield easily on religious issues but also at those Palestinians who voted for Hamas because of its aversion to corruption. The Palestinian public needs to see the price of misplaced support. Much is at stake.

Fortunately, there are preliminary signs that the international community does not want Hamas to be spared the consequences of its victory.

The Bush administration got off to a good start with its orchestrated summit in London on Monday. The Quartet -- the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations -- made clear that aid to the Palestinian Authority "would be reviewed by donors against [the] government's commitment to the principles of nonviolence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations including the road map [to peace]."

But such a statement should be only the beginning, not the end. It will not be easy. Since a new Palestinian government has not yet been formed, the Quartet has not yet been put to the test of making decisions on funding, which could strain trans-Atlantic unity.

On many issues, as one European official admitted to me, the European penchant is "to walk softly and carry a big carrot." This is often true on the Palestinian issue; the EU looked away from Palestinian corruption. Europe has tended to view the conflict as a Palestinian David facing an Israeli Goliath -- giving Palestinians, not Israelis, the benefit of the doubt.

Frequent trans-Atlantic consultations seem useful to prevent European backsliding. Such backsliding is more likely to occur either after the formation of a Hamas government, when the funding issue is acute, or after the March 28 Israeli elections. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has pledged humanitarian provisions, which could ease subsequent trans-Atlantic differences.

The key for the United States is managing a set of relationships to ensure that the trans-Atlantic consensus remains and that key Arab states realize that Washington is watching carefully how they deal with Hamas. Otherwise, Hamas will be able to drive a wedge, and the United States will be outmaneuvered.

Hamas, which enjoys a long-standing relationship with Iran, reportedly turned to Tehran in December for a sharp increase in aid. A decision by the Quartet to halt aid to Hamas won't drive Hamas closer into the arms of Iran because it's already there. Tehran may try to counter any Palestinian budget shortfalls because it views Hamas' victory as a regional windfall for Islamism and anti-Israel activity.

The Palestinian Authority receives \$900 million a year from international donors, and Iran gives at least \$150 million annually to its favorite terror group, Hezbollah.

If Iran does not come through, it is also possible that Hamas will seek to court the only other major source of funding potentially available to the group -- the Persian Gulf countries, which are flush with oil revenues. All of them cherish their relationship with the United States, and it would be useful if Washington warned them that aid to Hamas carries a diplomatic price. Arab states should follow the lead of Egypt, which made clear that Hamas must recognize Israel and halt violence.

According to the World Bank, there are no people who have received more per capita largesse from the world in the last five years than the Palestinians -- \$5 billion. This investment stemmed from a belief in a two-state solution, Israel and Palestine. If this commitment is not there, the support will dissipate.

A free election does not mean a free ride.

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