

# Between Palestinian and Israeli Elections: Implications for U.S. Policy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



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



## Brief Analysis

On January 30, 2006, Robert Satloff, Dennis Ross, and Michael Herzog addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr Satloff is the Institute's executive director. Ambassador Ross is the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow. Michael Herzog is a brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and a visiting military fellow at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### ROBERT SATLOFF

Hamas's 44.5 percent of the vote in the January 25 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections was, in comparative terms, a landslide -- more than Britain's Labor and Conservative parties ever received under Tony Blair or Margaret Thatcher, and more than U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon received in their first White House victories. Pollsters tell us that the key issues in the Hamas victory were corruption, provision of services, and law and order, not the confrontation with Israel. In practical terms, the reason for Hamas's victory matters little; the election empowers a party whose *raison d'être* is the destruction of the Jewish state.

Given Hamas's opposition to the existence of Israel and to any agreements that derive from recognizing Israel, its electoral success represents a democratic coup against the institutions of peacemaking. With the Islamist group's

majority of seventy-six seats in the PLC, the Palestinian Authority (PA) will move from a flawed potential partner for peace to an adversary -- or, depending on the PA's behavior, even an enemy. The repercussions will be felt beyond the West Bank and Gaza: among Israel's Arab population, in Jordan (where the Hamas wing of the Muslim Brotherhood is ascendant), and throughout Arab and Muslim societies. What makes this especially tragic is that this outcome could have been prevented with fully democratic means -- i.e., the imposition of strict but legitimate conditions for the participation of any party in the election, including the renunciation of violence and the recognition of Israel's right to exist.

Hamas was formed in December 1987 to provide the Muslim Brotherhood with a vehicle to participate in the first Palestinian uprising without exposing itself to the risk of fully fledged Israeli retaliation. Hamas exists only as a means of confrontation with Israel, and would revert to being a wing of the Muslim Brotherhood were it to renounce violent resistance. Hamas is tactically flexible but strategically consistent -- the eradication of Israel is the prime directive from which Hamas will never waver.

Observers who see a silver lining in Hamas's victory take one of two positions. The first argues that with the responsibility of government, Hamas will be forced to moderate its position in order to negotiate with the Israelis and deliver on its promises to the Palestinian people. This school of thought mistakes tactics for strategy. Hamas is eager to leverage its victory to strengthen its grip on all levers of control of Palestinian society. Hamas will suspend terrorism against Israelis to achieve its near-term objective of taking over the institutions of power in the West Bank and Gaza; the goal, however, remains the ultimate fight to eradicate any Zionist presence in Palestine.

Other advocates of a "silver lining" argue that Hamas's experiment in government will prove more difficult than opposition, and its failure to deliver will deal a blow to the Islamist model. This view, however, shows little care for the lives of millions of people who -- like the long-suffering people of Iran -- may have to live for decades under the rule of Islamist extremists.

In fact, there is no silver lining in the empowerment of an "Islamic Republic of Palestine."

MICHAEL HERZOG

Hamas's election victory will create many tensions among Palestinians and with Israel.

The Hamas-Fatah relationship. Fatah currently controls the entire apparatus of the Palestinian government and will be unwilling to abandon its control without a struggle. Fatah officials are likely to reject the idea of taking orders from Hamas, and some leaders -- such as the former security chief Mohammad Dahlan -- are already positioning themselves for a confrontation. Such a situation promises to foster instability for near and medium terms.

The Hamas-Abbas relationship. Upon his election as PA president in 2005, Abbas promised to instigate a system of one authority, one law, and one gun under the auspices of political pluralism. His failure to do so has led in part to the current situation and has ushered in a period in which Abbas will be maneuvering for his political future and trying to maximize his authority. At the same time, Hamas will depend on Abbas's reputation and negotiating skills to secure financial aid, communicate with the Israelis, and lend some international legitimacy to the Palestinian cause. If Abbas decides to resign because he is unable to carry out his program, the international community would be faced with the undesirable possibility of a Hamas president in addition to a Hamas-led PLC.

Hamas and Israel. Hamas has stated that it is open to the possibility of negotiations with Israel through a third party. Israel has firmly stated that it will not deal with Hamas in any capacity until the organization renounces violence and accepts Israel's right to exist. Moreover, the Israeli government has yet to decide whether or not it will pass on the revenues it collects on behalf of the PA (some \$40 million-\$50 million per month) to a government led by Hamas. Such a situation spells the death of the internationally sponsored Roadmap to peace and is likely to encourage Israel's increasingly strong reliance on unilateralism. This will mean the completion of the separation barrier,

imposition of tighter security measures, and implementation of further unilateral withdrawals from Palestinian territory.

Security implications. The Palestinian security forces number more than 76,000 and are made up of a dysfunctional collection of mostly Fatah loyalists. Many of these men will be unwilling to take orders from Hamas. Hamas is therefore faced with a difficult choice: to confront the lackadaisical security employees and risk a violent confrontation, or to avoid a confrontation and thereby miss an opportunity to monopolize the means of coercion within Palestinian society. Neither path promises a clear outcome; both lead to the possibility of the continued dysfunctionality of the Palestinian security services, a continuation of terror from Palestine Islamic Jihad and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and the possibility of growing Iranian influence.

DENNIS ROSS

The last fourteen months in the Middle East have produced three developments that should have transformed the situation dramatically for the better: the death of former PA president Yasser Arafat; the election of Abbas, who ran on a platform of nonviolence, with 62 percent of the popular vote; and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from Gaza. The window of opportunity that should have been exploited was not. With Hamas's victory, that window has closed. Israelis and Palestinians are now in the midst of two earthquakes with two very different implications. Sharon built a broad Israeli consensus in favor of unilateral separation from the Palestinians; as a result, Israelis are prepared to withdraw from most of the West Bank. An opinion poll conducted before the Palestinian elections found that 77 percent of Israelis felt there was no Palestinian partner for peace; if anything, the unilateralist impulse will be stronger after Hamas's victory.

The election of Hamas may be first and foremost about remaking Palestinian governance. But Hamas rejects Israel's right to exist and promotes violence to achieve its ends. Hamas's goal is a wholesale restructuring of the PA, from education and security to health care and corruption. It cannot achieve any of these objectives if it is at war with Israel. As such, it needs the tahdiya, the calm, more than Israel, especially in the early period of its government. But Hamas should not get continued calm for free. If it wants calm, then Hamas cannot amass Qassam rockets, build increasing numbers of bombs, or turn a blind eye to acts of terror against Israel perpetrated by Islamic Jihad or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Hamas also wants and needs assistance from the outside. Here again, Hamas must not be allowed to escape the dilemmas of governing and the need to make choices. If it wants assistance and hopes to avoid isolation, it must recognize Israel's right to exist and end its support of violence.

Hamas must be presented with a choice that clearly dictates the consequences of its actions, that forces Hamas either to change its policies or face isolation. Any cooperation with the new Palestinian government without such a change in Hamas policy would indirectly legitimize the very policies the international community rejects. In this respect, the U.S. government has an important role to play in conducting an intensive and continued diplomatic effort to forge a common front among the Quartet of the United States, the EU, Russia, and the UN.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Joseph Solomon.

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