

Hamas's Rise and Israel's Choice

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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



Brief Analysis

On January 23, 2006, Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff addressed the 2006 Herzliya Conference on the Balance of Israel's National Security. Excerpts from Dr. Satloff's remarks follow.

"Beware the unintended consequences of sound policies. On June 24, 2002, President Bush announced a major shift in U.S. policy. No longer would fulfillment of diplomatic requirements -- that is, acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242 or recognizing Israel's right to exist -- alone merit the full engagement of the United States in assisting Palestinians as they try to achieve their legitimate rights through negotiations with Israel. From then on, how they handled themselves at home -- whether they are corrupt, whether they are democratic, whether they are, as the president said, 'untainted by terrorism' -- would all matter.

"And so began an era of U.S. diplomatic isolation of Yasser Arafat that complemented the physical isolation imposed by the Israel Defense Forces. This era ended only with Arafat's death. Along the way, there were innovations, like new laws and the creation of an empowered prime minister. A new day was dawning in which what happened inside the Palestinian Authority (PA) was a vital determinant of whether the outside world would work with the PA to achieve its diplomatic aims. This was a major step forward -- in my view, a step that corrected one of the deficiencies in the Oslo Accords.

"Fast-forward from June 2002 to January 2006. The PA is in chaos, bordering on bankruptcy, and near to collapse. Anarchy reigns. . . . Inside the PA, Fatah busied itself with debating which convicted murderer -- Marwan Bargouthi or Muhammad Abu Ali Yatta -- would head its election list. For its part, the party that everyone agrees is a terrorist party -- Hamas -- is putting up a spirited campaign and is poised to do well in this week's vote. How well? We can argue over the tea leaves of whether it wins a quarter or a third or even half of the vote; we'll know soon enough.

"At a certain level, it doesn't really matter, because Hamas attains legitimacy through this process. Who would have imagined that the process that began in 2002 with the aim of producing a Palestinian leadership untainted by terror would, in 2006, lead to a Palestinian parliament -- and potentially a Palestinian leadership -- only tainted by terror? And for that we are all to blame.

"Topping the list is the president of the PA, who adamantly refused to implement his own policy of One Law, One Authority, One Gun, and then had the world believe it would be easier to do so once Hamas is inside parliament than

it would be with Hamas having no legislative influence.

"Other Middle Easterners, like Egypt, are to blame, too. While they, quite rightly in my view, outlaw their own Islamic radicals and convince others, like the United States, not to deal with them, they are perfectly happy to give honor and prestige to Palestinian Islamic radicals in Cairo.

"We Americans are to blame, on several fronts: for failing to press Abbas to fulfill his commitments to security and disarmament early on; for not doing enough to strengthen Abbas so as to deny him the excuse that he needed these elections as a vehicle to implement those commitments; and for having such a messianic commitment to the power of elections to transform people that we were blind to the possibility that evil people can exploit democracy for evil ends.

"And with all due respect, you are to blame, too, for having a policy on Hamas that is so muddled, so opaque, so subtle, so contradictory that by the time you woke up to the reality of the Fatah-Hamas agreement it was too late. . . .

"I believe Israel lost a great diplomatic opportunity by not standing firm on preventing Hamas's participation in elections in the West Bank. After all, you ended the military occupation of Gaza; you remain the military occupier of the West Bank. But the way events turned out, you find yourself in the unenviable position in which the world denies you the benefits of having withdrawn from Gaza and denies you the rights of remaining the military occupier of the West Bank. Losing on both scores is no easy feat.

"At least we can take solace in another example of U.S.-Israeli strategic cooperation -- together, we ushered in the era of Hamas. Together, you and we. As President Carter could attest, more than a quarter century ago we made a mantra out of the conditions the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had to meet before it merited legitimacy, before the world would deal with it, before it could be part of diplomacy. We -- America and Israel -- agreed on those conditions. We may have disagreed on whether the PLO met them in 1988, but we agreed on the conditions nonetheless. They were: acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242; recognition of Israel's right to exist; and renunciation of terrorism. This week, the world -- including the United States -- will tacitly legitimize Hamas without demanding of it what we demanded of the PLO decades ago. It is not completely too late to set some benchmarks about Hamas's participation in public and political life but, my friends, this train has left the station.

"Hamas's consistent strategy. There are those who believe the organization is mellowing, that it is shedding its original mission and is ready for the hustle and bustle of compromise that is the lifeblood of real politics. Indeed, there are those who believe that Hamas may hold the key to an eventual resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. 'They are authentic,' it is said. 'An agreement reached with Hamas will be an agreement that lasts,' goes the argument. . . .

"Accept this analysis at your peril. Do not mistake tactical flexibility for strategic change. Hamas will be perfectly happy to talk with Israel, to negotiate with Israel. It is willing to negotiate with Israel out of the deeply held belief that it can negotiate you out of existence. If the negotiations do not achieve that result today, they may do so tomorrow, and if negotiations alone do not achieve that result, then Hamas will be wise enough to retain other assets -- or the potential to acquire those other assets -- to do the job by other means. Please do not hand over the keys to the realm to this organization in the belief that it has become domesticated -- in the mistaken idea that because their politicians are not corrupt, that because they can pick up the garbage and fix the potholes, that they somehow are moderate. I believe Hamas's strategy may be to get Israelis so addicted to the tahdiye, the calm, that Israelis will not interfere with the Islamist takeover of the PA. Hamas believes you are fools, and this is profoundly dangerous. Hamas has no reason for being other than the destruction of the Jewish state; if that were not its prime motivation, it would simply revert to being the Muslim Brotherhood, from which it came.

"The sky has not fallen. Despite the absence of a peace process, the sky has not fallen in the Middle East. Peace

treaties with Egypt and Jordan remain intact -- no more and not really much less than during the halcyon days of when the peace process was chugging along. I am no fan of public opinion polls in the Arab world, but I did note one by James Zogby recently that showed that the Palestinian issue dropped to seventh place on a list of Arab political priorities, somewhere below employment, education, healthcare, corruption, and even combating extremism and terrorism. Israel's relations with Europe have -- what is the right word? -- 'matured.' As one of your senior diplomats told me last week, today you can have serious discussions on serious issues, like Iran, without even the doorman at the foreign ministries of Europe nagging you about joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Israel's ties elsewhere -- China and India, for example -- rise and fall on indexes unrelated to the Palestinians. And your relations with Washington are strong and sound, especially now that the irritant of the China issue has been resolved.

"Don't get me wrong -- many people despise you. I have been amazed at how meek the response has been, for example, at the outbursts of the Iranian president against a member state of the United Nations. But, I am afraid, that is the reality regardless of the absence or presence of a peace process. Certainly no one in this room entertains the fantasy that Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon would be deterred one iota by the existence of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. The key point is simply this: the idea that you (and we) need a peace process to fill the diplomatic vacuum, to be seen to be doing something even if we are not, or to appease the political sensibilities of our European friends and your Arab neighbors is an idea that -- at the very least -- has much less resonance today than it may have once had. This is not an argument against making peace -- quite the contrary. This is merely an argument for pursuing a certain type of diplomacy for the right reasons and under the right circumstances. . . .

"For better or for worse, whether you like it or you don't, you are in charge. This is my most important comment. You control the territory. You will be the ones who make the calculations over the relative importance of geography, security, and demography. In broad strokes, you are masters of your own fate. Almost every other actor is reactive. Historically, the Palestinians are reactive. Ask any person who has negotiated with them -- and there are many in the room here today -- how many times was the Palestinian delegation the source of a new idea, a new map, or a new proposal? On the contrary, they were almost always reactive. But it is not only the Palestinians. My government is essentially reactive, too. And this is a good thing. The basic approach of the United States, including leaders of both parties and across administrations, is to try to be as helpful as they can to governments of Israel that seek ways to ensure peace and security for the people of Israel. That is why Bill Clinton went along with Ehud Barak's suggestion for a Camp David summit; that is why George W. Bush acceded to Ariel Sharon's strategy to build the security barrier and to circumvent the Quartet's "Roadmap" by withdrawing from Gaza.

"Of course, there will be tactical disagreements from time to time. And there is no doubt that you need partners to make real and lasting peace. But in a fundamental way, the negotiation that matters most in terms of defining a roadmap for the process is the national discussion that goes on inside Israel. I view the job of the United States as helping to ensure that Israelis can have that national discussion in an environment free from threats, bullying, or compulsion. As long as the outcome of that discussion does not impinge upon the fundamental rights of others, I view the job of the United States as working with Israel, Arab partners, and others to try to turn the outcome of that discussion into reality. This is not platitude; this is, I believe, how the upper echelons of our political system view this issue.

"What captured America's imagination about Prime Minister Sharon, to whom I and all friends of Israel send our heartfelt hopes for a full and speedy recovery, is the sense that he understood this. My view is that he understood that the existing paradigms for peacemaking are, shall we say, insufficient, so Sharon tried a different way -- unilateralism. I realize it is controversial; I understand the arguments of both its critics and its advocates. It is not my role to judge the merits, to assess whether the advantages in demographic terms outweigh the disadvantages in other areas. What I do applaud is the kernel of truth that is at the heart of this approach -- the idea that Israel has the

power, to a great extent, to shape its own destiny. It cannot do this alone, by any means; and it is not alone. But the roadmap that matters is the one that Israel charts.

"So, in my view, if Israel defines its own roadmap as remaining faithful to the diplomatic Roadmap, starting with phase one, recognizing that however just this approach is it is unlikely to achieve a change in the status quo in the foreseeable future, America will support it. And if Israel decides to overlook Hamas's growing influence and jumps to final status negotiations with Mahmoud Abbas as a last-ditch effort to save him and salvage the PA, America will not stand in the way, though this president is unlikely to invest personally in the effort to achieve a breakthrough. And if Israel defines its own roadmap as a unilateral path, America will support it too, despite its rhetorical commitment to that other Roadmap.

"The key, in my view, is in the deciding. The rest, as the sages say, is commentary."

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.

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