

# Don't Make Exceptions for Hamas

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In the West Bank, there is definite excitement in the air. Campaign posters are festooned everywhere in Ramallah in advance of tomorrow's Palestinian parliamentary elections.

Hamas is contesting these elections for the first time, and all polls point to the organization running very strongly. On a recent visit to Ramallah, I was told that Hamas would win anywhere from one-third to 45 percent of the votes and that the mainstream Fatah would eke out a victory with the help of smaller parties. Whatever the outcome, it seems distinctly likely that these elections will be seen as a sign of strength for the Islamic radical movement, whose signature policies range from supporting suicide bombings and calling for the destruction of Israel to providing social services and opposition to corruption.

Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar has indicated he wants Hamas to join the Palestinian Authority's cabinet. At the same time, he has made clear that his group's ideology remains fixed. On Palestinian TV on Jan. 17, he said, "We do not recognize the Israeli enemy, nor his right to be our neighbor, nor to stay (on the land), nor his ownership of any inch of land. . . . We are interested in restoring our full rights to return all the people of Palestine to the land of Palestine. Our principles are clear: Palestine is a land of Waqf (Islamic trust), which can not be given up."

Despite the belligerent tone, some believe it would be a good idea for Hamas to join the Palestinian government. They are convinced that giving this group public responsibility is a test that it will ultimately fail and that it will be discredited in the process. This is not a new argument. In fact, the same argument was made about the Islamic extremists when Ayatollah Khomeini took over in Iran. Indeed, the analysts were correct that the mullahs in Iran would lose public support, but were wrong that this would lessen their grip on power.

The mullahs have rigged elections in Iran so the moderate groups could not compete, let alone win. In the meantime, the mullahs led by their menacing president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, are on their way to acquiring nuclear weapons.

Another hope some analysts have is that once in power Hamas will split between those who favor good governance and those who are largely motivated by their terrorist aims. Whether this split will occur depends in no small part on whether the international community forces Hamas to choose. It is never easy for ideological movements to shift. Something needs to trigger it.

In the case of Israel, it was the pullout of Gaza that forced the Likud to decide whether its organizing principle was security or ideology. Those who favored security left with Ariel Sharon and formed the Kadima Party, which is leading in the polls so far despite losing Israel's fabled leader to a coma.

Hamas will not be forced to make pragmatic decisions unless the international community is united. Importantly, the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations -- the group of countries monitoring the Palestinians' political development -- declared in their last statement that "a future Palestinian Authority cabinet should include no member who has not committed to the principles of Israel's right to exist in peace and security and an unequivocal end to violence and terrorism."

The United States has sought to make its position clear. Two weeks ago, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that "armed groups have no place in the democratic process."

One could easily see backsliding on the issue of Hamas's role in the cabinet. Invariably, there might be Europeans who would like to interpret the matter narrowly, saying the only criteria should be whether a minister in the cabinet supports a cabinet platform, even though his party supports terror.

To grant de facto legitimacy to Hamas would be wrong and undermine Palestinian moderates, who have made clear to the Palestinian public the radical road is a sure way for them all to become international pariahs and for the goal of statehood to become a more distant prospect.

Hamas needs to be forced to choose. Peace in the Middle East requires tough choices, not quick fixes that have no impact on the underlying reality.

David Makovsky is senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He also is an adjunct lecturer at Johns Hopkins University.



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