

## Good for Nothing

Jan 11, 2006



Articles & Testimony

**T**he Bush administration this week faced a decision that could help determine whether Ariel Sharon's centrist party survives the end of his political career. Fortunately, Washington appears to have chosen wisely -- by choosing not to act at all.

Here's the background: On January 25, the Palestinian Authority is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections, the first in a decade. Thanks to an Egyptian-brokered deal reached last year between Palestinian factions, the ballot will -- for the first time -- include the radical Islamist movement Hamas, a group responsible for murdering hundreds of innocent Israeli civilians and formally labeled as terrorist under U.S., European, and Israeli law. With squeaky-clean candidates who put to shame many of the corruption-laden pols of the ruling Fatah Party, Hamas is likely to do quite well. Indeed, Hamas has already proven to be a strong vote-getter in municipal elections and, if polls are a useful predictor, the group will garner a third or more of Palestinian votes.

How the world reached the point of legitimizing this bloodthirsty gang via the cleansing of elections is a long and sordid story. Frankly, there is enough blame to go around.

Topping the list is Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who may talk about reining in Hamas (and even more radical groups) under the motto "one law, one authority, one gun" but has so far refused to act. Instead he prefers to include the well-armed Hamas inside a big Palestinian tent.

For its part, Israel was so preoccupied with the massive undertaking of withdrawing its soldiers and settlers from Gaza last summer that it didn't wake up to the danger of the Fatah-Hamas election deal until September. By then, months of silence had already been taken as Israel's tacit assent. Throughout autumn, Israel made a half-hearted effort to take a stand against Hamas's participation in the election, but by then it was too little, too late.

Finally, there was the carefully ambiguous position taken by the United States, which continued to condemn Hamas while insisting (in the words of Condoleezza Rice) that Palestinians be given "some room for the evolution of their political process." There are two reasons why the Bush administration, which has taken such a praiseworthy stand against terrorism in general, decided to bless an election that will legitimize one of the world's worst terrorist groups. For one thing, Bush has embraced the power of elections to transform politics even in places thought to be inhospitable to democracy. By applying the lesson it drew -- with some justification, of course -- from the experience of courageous Iraqi and Afghan voters, the Bush team has extolled the "pothole" theory of elections, the idea that even extreme radicals can be transformed into civic-minded do-gooders when they have to face the electorate. In addition, Abbas has said that only after elections will he begin to implement any steps to curb Hamas. Of course, he has yet to explain why he will be better positioned to do this once Hamas wins a large bloc of seats in the Palestinian legislature than he is now, when he has no Islamist parliamentary opposition to overcome. Nevertheless, the Bush administration is keen to call Abbas's bluff and see if he can finally deliver.

Then, three acts by Ariel Sharon altered the situation. First, he bolted Likud, formed his own party, and triggered a sprint to new Israeli elections. Next, probably with one eye to the campaign, he announced that his government

would not allow Palestinians to vote in Jerusalem, a decision which Abbas said would force him to cancel elections altogether. While Palestinians had cast ballots in Jerusalem twice before, Sharon decided that Israel's capital was where he would draw the line on Hamas. Finally, when he was felled by a stroke last week, Sharon left the political scene before making a definitive decision either to stand by the ban or to pull back from the brink -- as Israel had done earlier this year when it barred Hamas from any election role and then changed its mind. That decision was left to the Israeli cabinet under the leadership of Sharon's disciple, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The easiest way the Bush administration could make sure Palestinian elections proceed on schedule would be to pressure Olmert to reverse the decision on Jerusalem voting. Indeed, that is precisely what Abbas wants Washington to do. On Monday he even pulled an old diplomatic maneuver by announcing that he had a promise from U.S. officials to that effect.

Such a move by the United States would have put Olmert in a no-win situation: Either he bows to Washington, in the process countermanding Sharon's policy while giving his competitors a powerful campaign issue, or he says no to Washington and faces voters as the man who flubbed his first effort at handling Israel's most important alliance.

Thankfully, Washington did the right thing: nothing. It threw the issue back where it belongs -- as a matter for Israelis and Palestinians to determine. As State Department spokesman Scott McCormack said, "Whatever the solution is, it needs to be mutually acceptable to the Israeli side and the Palestinian side, to take into account Israel's very real security concerns, while also addressing the Palestinian desire to have all Palestinians able to participate in these upcoming elections."

By wisely stepping out of this tussle, the Bush team let Olmert come up with his own subtle solution that honors both historical precedent and Sharon's preferences. According to press reports, he plans to ask his cabinet to allow the vote but prohibit any Hamas candidates from appearing on the ballot in Jerusalem. This, in turn, will force Abbas to do something he hates to do -- make a decision, in this case on whether to accept the Israeli conditions for elections in Jerusalem, hold them everywhere but the Holy City, or postpone them altogether.

For those with long memories of American entanglement in Israel's domestic politics, it is important to note that the Bush administration's non-position is not analogous to the Clinton administration's 1996 attempt at boosting Shimon Peres in his election battle with Benjamin Netanyahu following Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. In this case, the Bush team faced the much simpler choice of whether it would or wouldn't abstain from hurting the chances of the incumbent. By doing nothing, it made the right call.

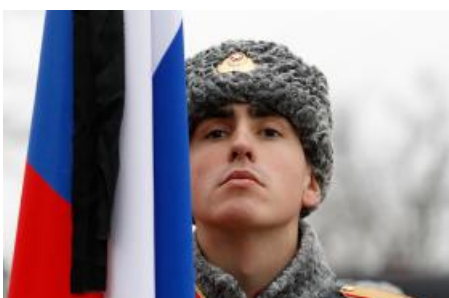
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