

To Stay in the Game, Hamas Has To Play by the Rules

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If the international community is serious about strengthening Abbas and the PA, officials must make clear that they will not deal with Palestinian parties that reject his program of "one authority, one law, one gun."

The division in the domestic Palestinian political scene ahead of Israel's forthcoming withdrawal from Gaza is pronounced. The Palestinian Authority, under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas seeks a smooth, co-ordinated transfer of power in order to define the Israeli pull-out as a positive step towards ending the occupation of the West Bank through negotiations and the reactivation of the road map for peace. However, Hamas, the militant Islamic group, is trying to demonstrate through rocket barrages and martial displays that the withdrawal is a military victory achieved by the group's violent campaign against Israel. Further attacks, they believe, will lead to more Israeli pull-backs.

With such divergent reactions to the Israeli withdrawal and the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the US and the European Union must present a united front in their efforts to empower Mr. Abbas's Palestinian Authority. Reports that EU representatives had begun meeting recently-elected Hamas local officials suggest a disturbing precedent. Hamas's behaviour indicates that such interactions are counterproductive and weaken Mr. Abbas's leadership of the PA, its divided but still dominant Fatah faction, and the pursuit of a two-state solution. The impetus to engage Hamas stems from the group's growing political support demonstrated by its victories in local elections this year. The EU denies it is engaging in "a political dialogue" with Hamas and says it will not until Hamas renounces violence and accepts Israel's right to exist. But meeting its officials now, even locally, bestows legitimacy

on it without forcing it to abide by Mr. Abbas's approach to forgo violence for political negotiations with Israel.

Mr. Abbas himself is trying to integrate Hamas into PA institutions on the condition that it respect the government's authority, mainly by forgoing an independent arms capability. However, Hamas's behaviour last month indicates it prefers to undermine the PA, probing for weaknesses where it can assert its own authority. Hamas refused a PA offer to form a national unity government, insisting instead on creating an independent body to replace the PA's efforts to manage the Gaza transition. Moreover, Hamas responded to Mr. Abbas's efforts to maintain the fragile Israeli-Palestinian truce by launching rockets at Israeli targets the day Mr. Abbas arrived in Gaza to negotiate with them. When PA security services tried to stop these attacks, gunfights ensued and Hamas members burnt police stations and vehicles. It eventually renegotiated a ceasefire with Mr. Abbas and pulled back from the brink of an outright civil war, but Hamas is clearly testing its potential to take over the PA.

Hamas has made no secret of its reasons for entering the Palestinian political game. As Mahmoud al-Zahar, its leader, has explained, electoral victories by Hamas, "would be a new positive change in understanding what is actually taking place and who the world must deal with." Hamas believes that in the current climate of encouraging democracy in the Middle East, the west will be forced to deal with the winners of elections and Hamas will gain international legitimacy. The more Hamas meets with EU officials, the more evidence it can provide of its potential for success. The longer it can pursue its political programme while keeping its arms, the more it believes it can have it both ways.

As to whether engaging Hamas will have a moderating influence, Mousa Abu-Marzuq, a Syrian-based Hamas leader, is unequivocal: not a chance. "Hamas will not change or transform as a result of any European or US desire. If they want to deal with us then let them deal with us as we are now and not try to change us."

If the international community is serious about strengthening Mr. Abbas and the PA, it must make clear that it will deal with no Palestinian political party that does not accept Mr. Abbas's programme of "one authority, one law, one gun." Winning elections cannot give Hamas a free pass; its commitment to abiding by democratic rules by forgoing an independent militia, and its acceptance of the international road map for peace and a two-state solution should be the measures by which Hamas's political seriousness is judged. Accepting anything less from Hamas would undermine Mr. Abbas's programme at a time when international efforts are focused on his success. ❖

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