

Talk Is Cheap

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Articles & Testimony

From Newsweek to The New York Times, the Middle East policy buzz du jour is whether the Bush administration will jettison years of precedent and authorize diplomatic contact with Hamas, the radical Islamist movement in the West Bank and Gaza. This is not a hypothetical issue. Running on an anti-corruption, clean-government platform, Hamas won nearly half of all municipal councils up for grabs in recent voting. The group's tally was so impressive that Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas indefinitely postponed legislative elections, previously scheduled for July, at least partly to forestall Hamas success on the parliamentary front as well. To many observers, Hamas is growing so powerful that American diplomats would be willfully negligent by failing to even talk with the group. "On the mainstream Palestinian political scene there is now a growing consensus that Western countries must understand that Hamas cannot be ignored in any attempt to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict," argued Ghazi Hamed of the Lebanese newspaper The Daily Star in an article titled "Talk to Hamas, the group says it's dying for everyone to listen." The Independent of London editorialized in favor of British contact with Hamas: "Arguably, the absence of contact between Israel and Hamas makes careful overtures from outsiders more important." In a Christian Science Monitor piece urging Western governments to engage with Hamas and other Islamist groups a columnist wrote, "All people who claim they're committed to democracy have to be for the process even if—at home or abroad—it brings to power parties with which we disagree."

The rub, of course, is that Hamas—an Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement—is more than just a party with which we disagree; it is a terrorist organization, responsible for the murders of hundreds of Israelis, Americans, and citizens of many other countries. Its hate-filled charter—which endorses just about every crazy conspiracy theory about Jews, Freemasons, Lions, and Rotarians ever conceived—specifically calls for Israel's destruction. According to U.S. law, any contact with Hamas is prohibited; facilitating the transfer of funds to Hamas is a federal crime.

So which is the correct approach to Hamas—engagement or isolation? The answer lies in our historical experience with another terrorist organization eager for contact with Washington: the Palestine Liberation Organization. The United States should subject Hamas to the same conditions it demanded of the PLO two decades ago—conditions, it's worth noting, to which the PLO was not subsequently faithful. In other words, it is only worth engaging Hamas after it fulfills a set of commitments that would, by their very nature, transform the organization from a radical terrorist group into a legitimate political party. And such concessions, unlike those made by the PLO, will have to be tested over time.

First some background. During his meeting with Abbas last month, President Bush affirmed his view of Hamas as a terrorist group. Subsequently, unnamed "senior administration officials" pooh-poohed any chance that America's "forward strategy for freedom" in the Middle East may pass through Hamas. But the president himself has fueled rumors of a new approach through his embrace of the pothole theory of governance: the idea that even extremists can moderate when they are forced to meet the mundane demands of their constituents, like filling potholes. Bush's spokesman, Scott McClellan, has gone even further, hinting that contacts with elected Hamas officials were in the

offing because, as he said, “if you look back at the previous Palestinian elections, the people that were elected, while they might have been members of Hamas, they were business professionals ... not terrorists.” Such neat distinctions open the door for arguments in favor of U.S. diplomats and aid officials engaging with Hamas mayors on municipal issues and development projects. That is how the U.S.-Hamas dialogue would be born.

On this issue, our British allies may be stalking horses for possible change in American policy. On the one hand, Britain led the fight within the European Union to have Hamas listed as a terrorist organization, leading to a formal ban on diplomatic contacts with the group. On the other hand, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw admitted last week that British officials had twice met with Hamas members who are elected municipal officials. In Palestinian areas, he said, meetings between diplomats and local leaders are “de rigeur” and “required.” While Straw promised such meetings would not happen again, reports have also emerged that the EU has quietly adopted a new policy authorizing diplomats below ambassadorial rank to have contacts with Hamas politicians in the context of European monitoring of forthcoming Palestinian legislative elections.

This puts President Bush in a difficult position. He has no interest, of course, in promoting Hamas as an alternative to the more secular Palestinian Authority, currently headed by a post-Arafat leader elected on a platform of nonviolence. But his principled, even zealous, advocacy of democracy could box him into a position where he feels compelled to deal with popularly elected Hamas politicians. What is Bush to do?

An idea from the past seems worth resurrecting. Forgotten in the debate over Hamas is America’s history with the PLO; indeed, the parallels to the current situation with Hamas are uncanny. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, the PLO—which was then, and remains now, both a national movement and a terrorist group—was eager to open a political dialogue with the United States. For PLO leader Yasir Arafat, the legitimacy that would flow from such a dialogue would not only cause a rift in American-Israeli relations but would also cement his own claim to be the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”

Many regional “experts” urged Washington to recognize the PLO’s popularity on the Arab street and talk directly with Arafat as a way to jumpstart peace talks, but successive administrations demanded that the PLO first meet three demands: renounce terrorism; accept U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, which called for “secure and recognized boundaries” for all states in the Middle East; and recognize Israel’s right to exist. For years, Arafat tried to worm his way out of fulfilling these conditions, but in November 1988, as Ronald Reagan was about to leave office, Secretary of State George Shultz decided to relieve the incoming Bush team of a diplomatic headache by accepting a vaguely worded declaration from Arafat as fulfilling those three tests. Hence, the U.S.-PLO dialogue was born. It didn’t last long, however. In June 1990, Washington suspended all contact with the PLO when Arafat refused to renounce terrorism by one of the PLO’s constituent groups, and the dialogue did not resume until Israel negotiated the Oslo accords with Arafat in 1993. To this day, U.S. law still considers the PLO a terrorist organization; contacts—such as last month’s warm White House welcome for Abbas, who follows in Arafat’s tradition of serving as both PLO chairman and head of the Palestinian Authority—are permitted only by special presidential waiver.

The lesson for today’s debate over Hamas is clear: Local popularity—whether measured by polling data or the ballot box—should not by itself merit Washington’s seal of approval. Two other tests are key: a terror test (does the group renounce armed struggle to achieve its aims and accept negotiations as the only means to a settlement?) and a values test (does the group recognize Israel’s legitimate right to exist?). If Hamas wants a relationship with the United States, it should meet both tests; and if it doesn’t, the United States would be wise not to deal with those Palestinian municipalities that have elected Hamas politicians. Instead, America could send funding for local projects to the Palestinian Authority and have the appropriate ministry execute the plans; send the money via an NGO; or even scrap U.S. funding for a particular town’s project altogether—and demonstrate to local citizens that voting the Hamas ticket is not cost-free.

What sad irony it would be if the United States failed to demand of Hamas today what was demanded of the PLO two decades ago. To expect such concessions before talking to Hamas is only common sense. It should be de rigeur and required.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



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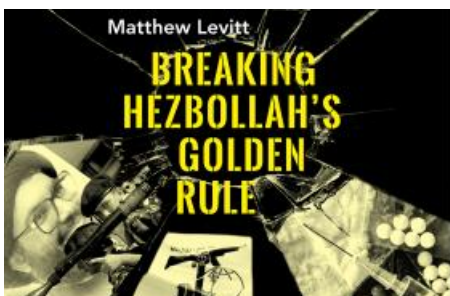
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