

Undermining Hamas and Empowering Moderates by Filling the Humanitarian Void

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Now that Israel has disengaged from the Gaza Strip and four settlements from the northern West Bank, the international community has a clear interest in doing all it can to see that the post-withdrawal security situation remains stable so that the exit from Gaza leads to further steps along the path laid out in the Quartet's Roadmap to Middle East peace. As former World Bank leader James Wolfensohn, now Washington's special envoy for disengagement, lobbies world leaders to offer significant support for Palestinian development projects, a parallel effort is necessary to create new, transparent public and private social-service organizations unaffiliated with Hamas or other groups engaged in terrorism or political violence.

The Hamas Dawa

Hamas, like many other terrorist organizations, conceals its activities behind charitable, social, and political fronts. Hamas's infrastructure of social-welfare institutions, the backbone of its proselytizing efforts (dawa), generates both popular support for the organization and logistical support for its terrorist attacks. Critically, academic studies have identified the decline of both popular and logistical support as key prerequisites for the demise of terrorist groups. Denying Hamas the logistical, financial, and recruitment networks provided by its dawa infrastructure would therefore go far toward undermining the group's radicalization and recruitment capacity and disrupt its ability to carry out the suicide bombings and other attacks that are its hallmark.

Hamas's social-welfare organizations, supported by a network of foreign charities also tied to Hamas, answer to the same "political leaders" who are responsible for countless terror attacks against Israelis. Hamas leader Dr. Mahmud al-Zahar explained, "Hamas responds to all questions related to the life of the citizens -- not only in case of confrontation but also in the political, economic, social, health, and internal-relations fields. This movement has proved that it is one organic unit. Mistaken is the one who thinks that the military wing acts outside the framework of Hamas or behaves recklessly." Hamas charities exploit all facets of their relief efforts, from hospitals to schools and even libraries. The charity committees, mosque classes, student unions, sport clubs, and other organizations run by Hamas all serve as places where Hamas activists recruit Palestinian youths for positions in the Hamas dawa, for terrorist training courses in Syria or Iran, or for suicide and other terror attacks. Hamas has buried arms and explosives beneath its own kindergarten playgrounds, paid the salaries of active terrorist operatives on the rolls of its charity committees, and recruited doctors to help infiltrate suicide bombers into Israel from the West Bank.

The need for humanitarian support is indeed acute in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where in 2004 47 percent of Palestinians were reported to be living below the poverty line. But this need -- and the fact that Hamas efficiently exploits this need to great effect -- should not amount to a free pass for the terrorism Hamas carries out and the political violence it espouses. Denying Hamas the ability to play both humanitarian and terrorist roles simultaneously would not only disrupt the group's logistical and financial support apparatuses but would also force the group's more moderate supporters to choose between terrorism and political violence on the one hand and Islamic proselytization and community activities on the other. And as Hamas activists enter Palestinian politics, fostering such splits within Hamas is critical. Having members elected to official office should not on its own legitimize Hamas as long as the organization continues to engage in terrorism, political violence, and hateful incitement. As European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Javier Solana asserted, "Hamas must transform itself into a political party and begin by disarming. A political party cannot bear arms; this exists in no democracy."

International Cooperation and Humanitarian Support

At the same time it presses the Palestinian Authority (PA) to shut down the Hamas dawa, the international community should launch a cooperative effort to create a trustworthy, transparent humanitarian relief system that fills the welfare void Hamas exploits that does not promote support of "martyrs' families." According to European officials, previous EU efforts to find legitimate charities and humanitarian organizations on the ground in the Gaza strip that are not tied to Hamas or other terrorist groups failed. In some cases, international organizations that bothered to have their books audited hired accountants tied to Hamas because of the group's trustworthy reputation.

Any such effort would have to start from scratch with new government offices partnered -- or "twinned," to borrow a technical EU term -- with Western experts capable of providing technical expertise and with new private institutions (NGOs) overseen by outside regulators. This is not as massive an undertaking as some suspect; the amount of money Hamas actually spends on social welfare is relatively small compared United Nations (UN) and other international aid. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East's (UNRWA) cash budget for 2005 was \$339 million, while U.S. and Israeli estimates of Hamas's annual spending on social welfare range from \$40 million to \$75 million. Indeed, there are important lessons international aid organizations could learn by studying how Hamas gets such tremendous bang for relatively little buck.

But it is not clear the international community is focused on empowering Palestinian moderates by filling the humanitarian void in which Hamas plays to great advantage. Money is not the issue. At the June 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, Wolfensohn secured an agreement from the world's economic powers to increase their aid for Gaza and the West Bank by another \$3 billion. That is vastly more than what Hamas spends on its dawa, even considering that much of the money raised in Gleneagles is intended to rebuild Gaza's devastated infrastructure. The problem has been the PA's inability to use aid efficiently and transparently. Given Hamas's relatively small budget compared to existing and pledged funds, a serious international aid effort funding reformed Palestinian service providers could dwarf the Hamas dawa with qualitatively and quantitatively superior services. Coupling active steps to shut down Hamas dawa agencies with effective international aid and reformed Palestinian social-service organizations would serve to crowd out Hamas's competing services.

As Wolfensohn has made clear, the Gaza disengagement will only prove successful if a realistic hope for increased prosperity exists for Palestinians following Israel's departure. His strategy focuses on the relationship between quality-of-life issues on the one hand and peace and security on the other. It would be useful to clarify that the quality-of-life side of the equation includes empowering and funding reformed Palestinian institutions and new, transparent NGOs to provide public and social services. If the Palestinian Authority were able to assume responsibility for providing its citizens a social safety net, it would enjoy the gratitude and public support that Hamas now enjoys at the PA's expense. Earlier this year the PA launched a Social Fund, conceived as a means of providing monthly welfare income to the poorest 20,000-60,000 Palestinians who otherwise rely on assistance from Hamas. Facilitating such experiments and undermining Hamas's grassroots support would not only help prevent the establishment of a "Hamastan" in Gaza, beyond PA control, it would deny Hamas operatives the logistical and financial support network they need to execute terror attacks.

Conclusion

While counterterrorism campaigns against active terrorist groups demand ongoing tactical operations of a preemptive nature, purely tactical responses are incapable of undermining support for such groups without simultaneously targeting the social and political activities underpinning that support. Crackdowns alone, while preventing many attacks, do nothing to split off moderates who lend support to radical groups for reasons other than the group's violence (such as anticorruption or humanitarian need). Empowering accountable, nonviolent Palestinian entities -- public and private alike -- to assume the responsibility for (and enjoy the resulting public support from) public works and social and humanitarian services should be a central goal of counterterrorism officials, peace negotiators, economists, and development experts alike.

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