

Hamas Lite!

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If the Israeli, the US government and the PNA are unhappy and shocked by the results of the stunning victory of an Islamist fundamentalist organization in the Palestinian elections, they have no one but themselves to blame.

Israel did not take seriously the genuine grievances of the Palestinians and instead of working towards peace negotiations moved towards unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, while continuing the occupation of the West Bank; The Bush Administration did not do anything except refer to a shabby Road Map that even itself was not taking it seriously; and the Palestinian National Authority, and particularly its leading faction, Fatah, did not make any effort to stop the rampant and growing corruption and lawlessness within its ranks, or to confront Hamas' encroachment into all aspects of the social, cultural, and political life of Palestinians.

Now that Hamas has won the absolute majority and is poised to form a new government, eventually leading the PNA, blame and threats are pouring in from all sides. The big question in everyone's mind is what to do with Hamas. Expressed policies so far have been: ignore it, confront it, or fully recognize it and hope for the best. These are all erroneous choices.

The Israeli centre right, including the Acting PM Ehud Olmert, suggests ignoring Hamas is mistaken as the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza are not like Southern Sudan or Somalia that can continue in total chaos, without a central administration or government.

Total chaos in the occupied territories will directly or indirectly spill over to Israel and will further radicalize the Palestinian society. The PNA is almost totally dependent on donors' money from the EU, the US and Japan, as well as the customs and taxes collected by the Israelis. Without this money, the PNA will not be able to provide even its meagre services and cannot pay the salaries of about 150 thousand employees. Such a situation will also push Hamas to get more money from its traditional allies in Saudi Arabia and particularly their co-fundamentalist Iranian regime. Hamas, simply cannot be ignored anymore.

The Israeli right and far right, like Netanyahu, and neo-con hawks in the US say to confront it. Confronting Hamas would make a total mockery of the calls for "democracy" in the Arab and Islamic world. Extreme forms of confrontation might mean the extension of the Israeli policy of assassination to other Hamas leaders, now democratically elected officials. This would create more problems for Israelis and will push Hamas and other Palestinians to more radicalism. With such a confrontation, Israel would definitely have no Palestinian partner for peace.

On the other hand, fully recognizing Hamas would mean giving credibility to a hard-core Islamic fundamentalist group, which even before moving into political power, had begun imposing its obscurantist and anti-human rights views and demands on the Palestinian population. In numerous trips to the occupied territories I have witnessed how Hamas sympathizers in Palestinian universities restrict women, or even try to limit freedom of speech in classrooms and on campuses. If left

alone, they would want to implement Sharia law in all aspects of Palestinian life.

Ironically, a part of the Palestinian secular left, including the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front (with the exception of those who left and formed the Feda organization) constantly supported Hamas, and are now faced with the consequences of an Islamist government in Palestine.

If Hamas cannot be ignored, confronted, or fully recognized, what can be done with it? The response is more tangled than can be imagined. Now Israel, North American and European governments, rather than panicking, issuing threats and proposing severe conditions and demands should see how Hamas is going to implement its "change and reform" platform. Hamas is in a difficult situation. It did not expect to win a majority and now is quite concerned about forming a government by itself, which is why it is appealing (so far unsuccessfully) to other organizations to join in governing.

Hamas in power would be different from Hamas in opposition or a champion of the charities and mosques. It has to materialize the demands of the Palestinian people who voted for Hamas. If Hamas chooses a confrontational policy, it will give the Israeli right the best chance to further crush Palestinian demands and move towards further unilateral actions.

Palestinians voted for Hamas for a variety of reasons but certainly not because they were all Islamists or desiring an Islamist state. They elected Hamas because they were frustrated and angry with the corruption of Fatah, and fed up with the failures of the PLO to end Israeli occupation. Hamas in power

has no choice but to make compromises. It has to deliver and its failures to do so will disillusion many of its followers. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that many Hamas leaders, like their counterparts in Iran, will soon find out that they do not have to wait till death to go to heaven, as they can find heaven on earth by moving to rich neighbourhoods of the territories! They will be less puritanical and will produce their own pragmatists, moderates and reformers.

Unfortunately, now that secularism is pushed to the background, the choice seems to be between a Hamas lite and a more radicalized Hamas, and the latter will bring more miseries to Palestinians and the Middle East in general. We should only hope that the American administration, learning the harsh lessons of its miserable failure in Afghanistan and Iraq, would understand this issue, help the pro-peace forces in Israel and Palestine to end the occupation and assist the creation of an independent, viable Palestinian state. The sooner this is done the better it would be for the world.

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