

Palestine: A New Hamas?

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Will Hamas and Sharon sit at the same negotiating table in the near future? Yesterday's inconceivable fantasies may become tomorrow's realities, regarding developments in the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. In a series of historic decisions over the past few months, Hamas has decided to run for Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections in the West Bank and Gaza, put on hold all militant operations along with other Palestinian factions, and consider seriously joining the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). These three steps complement each other and mark a turning point in the movement's political life.

Hamas boycotted the 1996 PLC elections because they were part and parcel of the 1994 Oslo Agreement, which the movement rejected vehemently. Now Hamas justifies its dramatic change in position by claiming that Oslo is no longer alive due to the intifada that began in September 2000. To be truthful, however, Hamas is living the realities created by Oslo, including the elections. It is not inconceivable that Hamas might eventually take part in peace negotiations, if the PLC elections are held and not blocked due to Israeli concern about Hamas participation.

Hamas is confident of its current strength. In the partial municipal elections held in January and May, it won nearly two-thirds of the seats, although such results should not be taken as an indicator of its expected performance in PLC elections. Unlike its efforts in municipal elections, Hamas will not run at full strength in PLC elections. Well-informed observers know that Hamas is not even trying to win a majority in the Council. Its hope is to head a strong bloc with a Hamas share of 30 to 40 percent of the seats, supplemented by an additional 15 to 20 percent expected to go to independents, leftists, and Fatah's internal opposition. If Hamas realizes its ambitions, the PLC would contain a majority opposition bloc that, even if its not purely Hamas, will nevertheless function as if it were so; that is, it will oppose the current political program of the Palestinian Authority.

A Hamas-led opposition bloc in the PLC would seek to block any decisions seen as compromising Palestinian rights via democratic procedures—but via ballots rather than bullets. This would be a nightmare for Israel and the United States. They pressed the Palestinian Authority for reforms, whether out of a sincere commitment to democracy or not, and now those reforms may well bring Hamas to the heart of the Palestinian polity. By declaring a truce on the militant front and participating in the elections, Hamas is cleverly using the democracy argument against the efforts of Sharon and Bush to pigeonhole Hamas as a terrorist organization. As matters stand now, it is extremely hard for the United States and Israel to oppose the participation of Hamas in PLC elections.

The Israeli government appears deeply worried that Hamas is repositioning itself in a political mode and will have an influential say in the future structure of the Palestinian Authority. Attempting to prevent Hamas participation in the elections directly would look

bad. An ugly, if conceivable, alternative could be at hand where Israel might try to provoke Hamas by assassinating one or more of its top leaders, pushing the movement to retaliate violently. Such a course would bring an end to the current truce, triggering reciprocal revenge attacks and creating a chaotic situation in which holding elections becomes virtually impossible. But perhaps feeding an international image of a chaotic, violent Palestinian scene is more useful politically to the current Israeli strategy than allowing a peaceful, democratic scene where all parties interact with each other via elections.

If Israel refrains from such a dire course, holding PLC elections with Hamas participation would have a profound impact on the nature of the movement, the Palestinian political scene, and more importantly the Palestinian-Israeli relationship and peace negotiations. In general, Israelis are correct that strong Hamas influence in the PLC will harden the Palestinian position in negotiations—not necessarily a bad thing. There could never have been a sustainable and final peace deal in any case without a real Palestinian consensus, to which Hamas must be a part. Hamas's political position is pragmatic and flirts with the possibility of accepting the concept of a two-state solution. If a decent final agreement were reached that satisfied Palestinian rights according to parameters of the Madrid Conference and UN resolutions, Hamas would be unable to object. In the end, a moderate, co-opted Hamas inside Palestinian institutions is far better than a radicalized and militarized Hamas on the outside.

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