



Hamas: What Next?

By Jon B. Alterman, Director, Middle East Program

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Anyone who tells you that they know what Hamas will do in power is lying. Even Hamas doesn't know what it will do in power, although its leadership is well aware that with its electoral victory comes a whole new set of challenges and the very real possibility of failure.

For the United States and its allies, the key task is to ensure that Palestinian politics emerge from the post-election period vibrant and functioning, and that Hamas evolves in a constructive direction. Writing Hamas off at the outset will have the same effect as embracing them too soon: it will entrench rejectionists and help push Palestinian politics further into a downward spiral. Seeking to engage with Hamas is not an attractive option, but it is the least bad one.

There is no question that Hamas has its full share of bloodthirsty killers bent on the destruction of Israel and the expulsion of Jews from historic Palestine. At the same time, though, the organization has its share of political opportunists, and some nationalists who viewed the last 2 years of occasional negotiations with Israel as a fruitless exercise. Among voters, its largest bloc may not have been its partisans at all, but instead those who were disgusted with the corrupt, feckless and ineffective governance that Fatah had provided for more than a dozen years.

Hamas's diversity will be for naught if Palestinian politics come to embody Ambassador Edward Djerejian's famous phrase, "One man, one vote, one time." But a Hamas that plays by the rules of open politics—improving conditions for its people, being accountable, and allowing an opposition—need not be a disaster for either Israeli or U.S. interests in the Middle East, whatever its rhetoric on Arab-Israeli peace.

Politically, Hamas has put forward an unforgiving vision of an Islamic state in the whole of Palestine. Realistically, the leadership is now responsible for creating a functioning entity in part of Palestine. That entity contains a large number of secularists and a small number of Christians; it relies on Israel to a large degree for infrastructure, public services, communications and transportation. There are remarkable incentives for Hamas to cooperate with Israel, for it will be hard to get a single thing done without Israeli forbearance.

The key task for Israel, the United States, and their allies, is to shape punishments and incentives that help guide Hamas in a desired direction. Punishments alone will not suffice, as the Palestinian people have shown themselves both willing and able to suffer awesome deprivations. Indeed, Western statements warning of the consequences of a Hamas victory seem only to have emboldened Hamas voters. Outsiders need to view incentives not as a reward for Hamas, but as a reward for positive behavior by the organization.

There is no question that some in Hamas will pursue violence until they are arrested or killed. Creating an alternative to this group within Hamas, and rewarding its actions, is a difficult but necessary task.

In the longer run, more diverse Palestinian politics may be better Palestinian politics. A split between the old and new guard in Fatah, combined with a split in Hamas could create a centrist nationalist coalition with the bona fides to make peace because it also has the bona fides of having made war. That may be the best available option for peace. The most attractive option to many Westerners, relying on familiar liberal voices like former IMF official Salam Fayyad and Hanan Ashrawi, is probably not viable. They squeaked into the parliament, but they swept no one in on their coattails.

The United States and Israel are tempted to refuse to talk with any member of Hamas until the organization renounces its charter, which contains both offensive anti-Semitic references and calls for the destruction of Israel. While understandable, such an approach is the wrong one. The charter must be changed, but such change must come as the consequence of a process, not as a precondition to it. After Oslo collapsed, Palestinians regard most processes with suspicion at the outset, anyway, and they are unlikely to give up much in order to start a new one. A wiser course would be to bar contact with members directly connected to violence, but be open to limited engagement with others.

Hamas has shown remarkable dynamism, creativity, and adaptability in its almost two decades of existence. As the organization embarks on its greatest challenge, outsiders should seek to shape its environment, not remain aloof from it.