

Blog Post: The Hamas Electoral Victories

A conversation! A veritable ongoing conversation! A conversation that was devoutly wished. That is what I and the good people at Americans for Peace Now had been hoping would here happen, and it has. I refer, of course, to the comments at the end of mine of last week, readily accessible on this site. And because the matter there discussed is of more than passing import, I propose to respond to those comments – not, heaven forbid, because I need the last word (although, come to think of it, I don't mind having it, not at all) but because it is as close as we who spend this time in cyberspace can come to having an honest-to-goodness interchange.

(All kidding aside, the knowledge, intelligence and civility of our correspondents comes as a relief. There were, in fact, one or two crude submissions – boorish, vituperative – of the sort that are not unknown in spaces such as this but are decisively unwelcome here. But only one or two, may their numbers decrease.)

Onward,

The Hamas Charter is, as Meir Carasso quite correctly points out, a wretched document. Until I'd read it, I assumed that it was of a piece with the PLO Charter. But I can recall nothing in the PLO document that is quite as unrelieved in its hostility to both Israel and the Jews as the language throughout the Hamas document.

We liberals, being of generally sunny disposition, often engage in exculpatory readings of the evidence, no matter how damning it looks on the surface. In this instance, if I had to bet the whole farm on the question of whether Hamas still means what it wrote 18 years ago or has since, and especially in light of its electoral victory, moderated its views – I'd bet the hateful language is still operative. How could I do otherwise, placing Israel's safety hostage to a change of heart that has, so far, almost no supporting evidence?

But that is not the bet Israel is today asked to make. No one asks, much less demands, that Israel bet the whole farm. The maximum demand that responsible people have made of Israel is that it wait and see, and in the meantime keep its powder dry.

That, it seems to me, is pretty much what Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is trying to do. He is preaching a hard line, to be sure, whether out of conviction or out of electoral exigency or both, but it is not the hardest line he could be preaching. And it is surely not as hard a line as that proposed for the United States in the legislation now before Congress in the form of a bill by Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Tom Lantos, a bill that would prohibit any and all contact between the US and a PA that has any connection whatever to Hamas, a bill that, according to the JTA, AIPAC intends to make the rallying point of its upcoming annual conference.

One grim digression: Quietly, Israel seems to be using this murky period, the time between the Palestinian elections and the March 28 Israeli elections, to come down very hard on terrorists in the West Bank. Two killed here, five there. That may be little more

than a way of placating a defense establishment that appears to be somewhat disturbed at Olmert's relative moderation. (Avi Dichter, the immediate former director of the Shin Bet, says that Hamas presents a strategic threat to Israel; Olmert says it does not. Shaul Mofaz, immediate past Minister of Defense, seems eager for military action; Olmert does not.) Or it may be a way of using this time when attention is directed elsewhere – to the political arena, or, for that matter, to the ongoing deterioration in Iraq – to “take care of business.” Or it may be simply that terrorist elements are trying very hard to strengthen their operations during a time when there is no effective Palestinian authority to constrain them, and where, therefore, Israel feels obliged to keep them off balance. My gut tells me it is mostly this last, but my gut is far from infallible.

The important point here, it seems to me, is that no one is arguing that Israel spread out a welcome mat for Hamas. The pressures of the international community, of the Quartet in particular, as also of Israel, are entirely appropriate. Hamas must know there's a price to admission to the international community. It is not an unfair price to demand of an organization that was yesterday carrying out suicide bombings.

The exact elements of that price warrant discussion. Hamas will not declare itself a Zionist party. It will not do what the PLO was never required to do, nor, for that matter, were Egypt or Jordan in their peace treaties with Israel: It will not acknowledge Israel's legitimacy as a democratic Jewish state. It is enough for it to accept Israel's sovereignty over its own territory.

That, of course, gives rise to another question: Exactly what is Israel's territory? And here Hamas faces what for it should be a real conundrum. Some of its spokesmen have said they cannot accept Israel sovereignty since Israel's borders have yet to be demarcated. At the same time, it has very explicitly rejected the idea of negotiation with Israel. How, then, can there be any resolution of the borders issue? Hamas might say: The 1967 borders, the Green Line. But the 1967 borders were from the time they were set meant as armistice lines, not as final national boundaries. UN Resolution 242 (the famous dispute on the question of whether Israel was directed to withdraw from “the territories” it had occupied or merely from “territories” it had occupied, leaving the extent of its withdrawal purposely ambiguous) did not specify Israel permanent boundaries, nor has any other agreement. Shall Israel, then, decide unilaterally? But that would be a recipe for endless debate regarding the legitimacy of its determinations. Thus: If Hamas is in any way prepared to accept an Israel next door to it, it will have to enter into negotiations regarding just where that Israel is, and how big. There are no grounds for optimism just now regarding its readiness to enter into negotiations; there are still less grounds to imagine they would have a successful outcome were they undertaken.

Still, it is important that Hamas not be allowed to think that others are merely “uncomfortable” with its history or with its electoral success. Its history is outrageous, its electoral success, whatever the reasons that explain it, as cause of great concern, and its future . . . Well, its future is a puzzle. For well beyond such pressures as it may feel from the international community, there are the pressures it will experience from the responsibilities of governing. It is the combination of these two sources of pressure that

commend a time out. Israel has nothing to lose from a wait-and-see approach. Indeed, it has much benefit to derive, for such an approach keeps it aligned with other major actors in the international community. And that, in turn, means that if Hamas remains Hamas, remains, that is, the actively terrorist organization it has been, Israel will have company in responding to it more forcefully.

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I leave aside for heads wiser than mine a discussion of what it means for an anti-democratic party to come to power through a democratic process, noting only in passing that the question here is even more puzzling. The question here is whether a people that chooses an anti-democratic party in a free election is then stuck with the full implications of its choice. Hamas, in addition to whatever else it is, is an Islamist party, a party that seeks ultimately to govern according to Sharia law. My hunch? We will not know what any of this means until four years from now, the time of the next Palestinian elections.

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The Irish analogy, put forward by Thomas Mitchell, has attracted a fair amount of attention recently. But the differences between Israel-Palestine and the two Irelands are quite substantial.

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