

Blog Post: The Folly of Excluding Hamas

Among this nation's most incisive and indefatigable observers of the Israel/Arab conflict is M.J. Rosenberg, who does a weekly column for the Israel Policy Forum. The other day, MJ (as he is widely known) wrote about what he sees as the folly of excluding Hamas, hence Gaza, from what appears to be a new start in the pursuit of peace in the region.

With MJ's permission, his column on the issue is here reprinted. I offer it here not because I agree with it, but because it is an important (albeit disquieting) statement that cast a serious shadow, if not a pall, on the sippy-cup of hope from which some of us have lately been drinking. (I allow myself one mixed metaphor a day; there is was.)

Here, then, MJ, followed by some questions regarding his argument, and an enthusiastic invitation to readers to submit their views in response:

Final Status Negotiations Now
MJ Rosenberg, July 20, 2007

I don't think I've come across a single person in Washington who believes that the plan President Bush outlined in his speech on the Palestinians Monday will work. Some say it won't work because the Palestinians won't play ball. Others say the Israelis won't. And pretty much everyone says "too little, too late."

This is not to say that there is not a strong consensus in favor of providing more aid to President Abbas and the people of the West Bank. There is -- although on that score there is almost universal agreement that the aid should have been provided when it might have helped Abbas defeat Hamas not after Hamas won a free and fair election. The irony here is that so many of the people urging support for Abbas now are the very ones who threw obstacles in front of aid when it would have made a critical difference.

It can't help but make one cynical about their sudden generosity of spirit.

The central problem with the Bush approach is that it is predicated on the idea that one can establish a vibrant democracy at peace with Israel in the West Bank while the other half of Palestine, Gaza, is ignored.

I can't quite understand why neither the Bush administration nor the Israelis understand that their embrace of Abbas, while dismissing the elected Hamas government, turns the West Bank into the Republic of South Vietnam while converting Hamas into the Viet Cong. We all know how that turned out.

Imagine if the British and the Arabs had told the Jews of pre-state Israel that the Haganah and Ben-Gurion were the good guys while Begin and the Irgun were a bunch of thugs. You think the Jews would have been impressed? Not bloody likely.

Daniel Levy, the former Israeli peace negotiator, who is now a senior fellow at the New America Foundation and Washington's most influential and original commentator on the conflict, put it like this in the Washington Post: "Dividing the region into extremists and moderates may sound nice, neat and tidy in a speech but on the ground there is a huge gray area that the President refuses to acknowledge."

Many Israelis agree.

This past week, Israel Policy Forum sponsored retired Israeli General Israela Oron, former Deputy National Security Adviser to both Prime Ministers Barak and Sharon, who came to Washington to tell Members of Congress that ignoring Hamas was impossible for Israel. Oron served 27 years in the IDF, starting before the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

"We have to deal with Hamas if only to achieve the release of Gilad Shalit, our captured soldier. So right there the whole idea of not talking to them on principle collapses."

General Oron does not believe that Gaza can be left to stew in its juices. "Even if Abu Mazen is able to dramatically improve conditions in Nablus and Jenin, that will not solve the problem. The West Bank Palestinians are the same people as the Gaza Palestinians. They have brothers and cousins there. You think they are going to be satisfied living well thanks to Israel and the United States while their relatives suffer?"

Oron does not favor any single approach. She favors back channel dealings with Hamas with the goal of achieving Shalit's release, a cease-fire, a workable arrangement on border passages, and significant aid to the people of Gaza through NGOs. She would also encourage third parties like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and even South Africa to work on effecting the reconciliation of Palestinian factions. But she also believes that "final status" Israeli-Palestinian negotiations can be commenced right now with Abbas, despite the temporary internal Palestinian split, something President Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad themselves favor.

How would that work?

Although Abbas only controls the West Bank (and not fully), he still is in full control of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is recognized worldwide – including by Israel -- as the legitimate representative of all Palestinians. The Oslo Agreement (and those that derived from Oslo) was between Israel and the PLO. And it is the PLO, not the essentially local governments of the West Bank and/or Gaza, with which Israel will sign a peace agreement when the time comes. This is a fact that not even Hamas contests. In fact, it has agreed that it is the PLO that is empowered to negotiate with Israel.

This is not something we hear much about these days. The people who are so enthusiastic about aiding Fatah and Abbas are anything but enthusiastic about a negotiation process that will require an immediate settlements freeze and dismantling of illegal outposts (both long promised by Israel and never delivered). Although they know

that these two actions – combined with a significant (not 250!) prisoner release would do more to help Abbas than all the aid Congress and the EU can provide together – the new Abbas champions do not believe that Israel need make any “concessions.”

Typically, in Wednesday's Wall Street Journal, right-wing historian Michael Oren inadvertently exposes the Bush approach by enthusing that "Never before has any American President placed the onus of demonstrating a commitment to peace so emphatically on Palestinian shoulders...the bulk of his demands were directed at the Palestinians...Mr. Bush set unprecedented conditions for Arab participation in peace efforts." In other words, crows Oren, Bush asks very little of the Israelis, and virtually everything of Palestinians.

In yesterday's New York Times, another right-winger, novelist Mark Helprin, celebrates the break-up of Palestine and describes the possibilities of a prosperous West Bank on the "brink" of statehood without mentioning a single thing Israel might have to give up.

Nice try, but no Palestinian – and certainly not Abbas – is going to accept a truncated pseudo-state full of Israeli settlements, checkpoints and highways for-Jewish-settlers-only. Any Palestinian leader who accepted such a deal would survive about as long as an Israeli leader who surrendered Tel Aviv!

But Abbas, as head of the PLO, has the authority to negotiate a final status deal with Israel along the lines of the Israeli-Palestinian agreement almost achieved at Taba in 2001, or one based on the Clinton parameters or the Geneva Initiative.

That kind of deal is the only one that can work. Israel gets security and the Palestinians get their state in the West Bank and Gaza with an official presence in East Jerusalem and some solution to the refugee problem.

Getting there would not be easy although Bush's proposed international peace conference is a place to start. (Secretary Rice said yesterday that, "We need from the Israelis a recognition that the future of Israel lies in the Negev and the Galilee, not in the continued occupation of the West Bank.") Israelis would have to give up the West Bank, including Hebron – holy to religious Jews. Palestinians would have to give up the idea of anything but a token "return" to pre-'67 Israel and recognize that the 22% of historic Palestine that is represented by the West Bank and Gaza is all they will ever get. And they will have to return to the genuine Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation that essentially made Israel terror-free during the last three years of Oslo (and that means taking on the militants, the way Arafat and Dahlan did then).

But Abbas, as head of the PLO, can probably deliver.

After all, he is no longer constrained by the presence of Hamas in his government. The down side is that he does not control Gaza. However, if Abbas can show Hamas supporters that he has achieved a final status agreement with Israel, he would likely gain full legitimacy with almost all Palestinians.

Of course, the peace deal with Israel would have to be put to a referendum (under international supervision) in the West Bank and Gaza and probably in the Palestinian diaspora as well. But the Hamas leadership in Gaza would be in the position of either accepting Israel and peace or being held responsible by Palestinians for losing their best chance of achieving statehood.

The bottom line is that flooding the West Bank with iPods and European cars will not save Abbas or even re-legitimize him in the eyes of his people. Only one thing can do that. Successful final status negotiations now. As for Ehud Olmert, even with single-digit popularity, his coalition is secure enough to do it too. Photo opportunities with Abbas during which Olmert re-states his opposition to real negotiations and offers token prisoner releases (250 out of 10,000) are less than worthless; they weaken Abbas and don't help Olmert either.

We need to keep our eye on the ball. The name of the game is establishing a viable contiguous Palestinian state. In the words of General Oron to an audience of some 25 Members of Congress this week, "the most important thing you can do to help Israel achieve security is to work to establish a Palestinian state now in the West Bank and Gaza. Not just for them, although they need a state. But, for us. Without it, we will not long survive as a Jewish state."

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While Olmert in the last few days – since the MJ article – has made some noises about engaging in final status talks with Abbas, a departure from his earlier position, just about every senior person with whom I spoke in Israel in late June, people of the left as well as people of the center, expressed great skepticism regarding Israel's current readiness for serious compromise. I fully share that skepticism. The bitter experience of Israel's withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza have soured the Israeli temper, and even an agreement via plebiscite, an agreement that includes the Palestinians of both the West Bank and Gaza, will not suffice adequately to sweeten the deal. Bear in mind: Not including Greater Jerusalem, there are now 270,000 Israelis living in the West Bank. The emotional and financial costs of relocating many of them (some, of course, are in settlement blocs that will remain intact) are more than many, perhaps most, Israelis will be willing to pay in return for an agreement with a "partner" as distrusted as are the Palestinians.

MJ cites Israeli General Israel Oren: . "Even if Abu Mazen is able to dramatically improve conditions in Nablus and Jenin , that will not solve the problem. The West Bank Palestinians are the same people as the Gaza Palestinians. They have brothers and cousins there. You think they are going to be satisfied living well thanks to Israel and the United States while their relatives suffer?" But that is not the point of aiding Abbas. The point of aiding Abbas is to persuade the Palestinians in Gaza that if they are to have a future, it is not with Hamas but with Abbas. A West Bank that is becoming less corrupt and more prosperous, more free, more "normal," is an

example of what might happen in Gaza; it discredits the Hamas way, except to the small minority of maximalist zealots who will continue to resist any agreement that announces or even implies recognition of Israel.

So: If the Israelis are not ready for concessions, not even if the concessions are sufficient to result in an agreement with the Palestinians, what can be done?

Talks on final status arrangements can begin. Since such talks may drag on for a very long time, Israel (and others) can undertake immediate changes in quality of life issues in the West Bank, thereby helping prepare the way for eventual agreement of the Palestinians. Such changes would have to include an immediate reconsideration of settlement expansion and growth, the immediate dismantling of *all* illegal outposts, a very substantial reduction in the number of checkpoints, a reconsideration of the route of the separation fence, and the early release of several thousand Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails – as well, of course, as an intensive effort to expand employment and educational opportunities throughout the West Bank.

These will not be easy actions for an Israeli government that governs mainly on sputtering inertial momentum and that suffers from considerable internal division. But they are dramatically easier than early agreement to all the territorial concessions that a final status agreement necessarily presumes.

What reciprocity might Israel expect? An end to the condoning of violence by the Fatah government, which we may already be seeing unfold; an end to the language of incitement and rejection, which we are also already beginning to see. But more than that, the one really new element in the process, the one teasingly emerging like a new sun over the horizon, the one that offers Israel's people something they have not dared dream of since the early Oslo days: Full normalization of Israel's relations with the entire Arab world, as proposed in the Arab League initiative.

No one can yet say how flexible is the Arab League proposal. It is possible that it was put forward not to achieve peace but to embarrass the Israelis, to establish definitively that it is they and not the Arabs who are the rejectionists. But such things often have unanticipated consequences – and, it ought be noted, it is possible, given other relevant trends in the region, that the proposal is quite seriously intended.

An Israel reluctant, at best, to set aside its deep suspicions of the benefits of a bilateral agreement with the Palestinians and an abiding fear that the costs of such an agreement far outweigh its benefits, may well – and in my view, should – take very seriously the prospect of what amounts to regional sponsorship of a peace agreement. That kind of sponsorship, which is what the Arab League initiative suggests, offers such an increase in prospective benefits that the costs may be considered reasonable.

In the meantime, of course, there remains the question of Gaza. Plainly, Israel ought do whatever it can to enable the Gazans to live more normal lives, to see to it that basic necessities are made adequately available, and that such back channel communication with Hamas as is possible, especially with regard to Corporal Shalit, be exploited. But that, necessary though it

be, is for the time being a side show, no more.

Finally: The issue of Israel's relationship to Hamas/Gaza in the current circumstances is, I think, more perplexing than either MJ or I imply. There is solid reason for ambivalence here. But I strongly suspect that MJ and I are in agreement – we've not talked about this – that the window of opportunity that now seems newly opened, if only by an inch or two, will soon close again if we revert to the foot-dragging subversions of the past. The need to capitalize, one way or another, on the present opportunity – the combination of an Abbas freed, at least in part, of the albatross of Hamas coupled with the historic Arab League initiative – is genuinely urgent.