

Know—and Don't Demonize—the Enemy

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It's hard to imagine what more Hamas might do to shore itself up as an enemy of peace with Israel. First it praised an April 17 Islamic Jihad suicide bombing in Tel Aviv which killed 10 Israeli civilians, wounding 70. Now after long resisting Al Qaeda's pandering invocations of the Palestinian cause for the "Arab street," Hamas has for the first time cast its lot with reviled jihadi murderer Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, whom the U.S. killed in an airstrike.

What's more, the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority refuses to curb Qassam rocket fire on civilians in Israeli cities like Sderot. An IDF probe has now concluded that a Hamas bomb, rather than a stray Israeli artillery shell, was responsible for the recent deaths of seven Palestinian civilians, including three children, and the wounding of forty others, among them many children, on a Gaza beach. By indiscriminately firing rockets on cities in Israel from residential areas in Gaza—a Palestinian war crime twice over—Hamas and Islamic Jihad recklessly endanger their own people.

After falsely blaming Israel, Hamas has announced the end of its 16-month old unilateral cease-fire and the resumption of a suicide bombing campaign against Israel. While a revenge attack may help bolster its image among the beleaguered and impoverished Palestinian public, a prolonged descent into warfare with Israel will do Hamas little good. Hamas simply cannot deliver to the Palestinian electorate on its central campaign promise of good governance if security deteriorates on its watch. And if it cannot perform, it will soon lose the coveted power it has gained as the first Islamist party to win a free election and form a government in the Arab world.

If a Hamas-Israel battle is in the offing, a new Hamas unilateral cease-fire may not be far behind. The IDF had previously forecast a series of intermittent truces with Hamas. This time, the question Israeli leaders should be asking is: are there any steps Israel can take which might help the next truce hold?

Former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevi, a hawk's hawk and Sharon advisor who championed the war with Iraq, has surprised many by cajoling the Israeli government to talk to Hamas. Halevi believes it is a mistake for Israel to insist that Hamas first recognize the Jewish state as a precondition for any discussion. "The shoe is on the other foot," he explains. "We should recognize them first while holding them [to] account...I think some Hamas leaders are ready to bite the bullet..." Halevi believes that Israel should try to negotiate a long-term truce with Hamas. Under such an arrangement, Hamas may agree to stop renegade groups from firing Qassam rockets at Israel—the very acts which helped unravel the current cease-fire.

An improved version of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's "convergence" of West Bank settlers behind the separation barrier, leaving more than 90% of the territory under Palestinian civil and eventual security control, might serve as a basis for such a deal. But it should be negotiated with

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, as Olmert is reportedly considering, rather than with Hamas. If the Israeli blueprint that flows from such talks is acceptable to the PLO and endorsed in a Palestinian referendum, Hamas may feel compelled to cooperate in its implementation. Israel would agree to refrain from expanding settlement blocs on the Israeli side of the barrier, relocating settlers to Israel proper or to vacant apartments in the blocs. It would signal its willingness to offer an equal swap of land in exchange for the settlements it incorporates onto the Israeli side of the fence. True, Israel would be giving up tangible assets in exchange for security promises and recognition. But most Israelis have already concluded that West Bank settlements beyond the blocs are not assets but economic, security and political liabilities for Israel. Moreover, the settlements, built among millions of Palestinians, extend Israeli control over the West Bank, jeopardizing Israel's Jewish majority, its Zionist mission, and its democratic values, sabotaging prospects for a two-state solution to the conflict.

Ideally, the new Israeli government would prefer to unilaterally consolidate the settlers behind the barrier without negotiations at all. But Israel would be better off receiving security guarantees in exchange for territorial moves, rather than ceding land for nothing. This time around, a multinational force should be put in place to monitor Palestinian compliance, to hold Hamas' feet to the fire in meeting Palestinian commitments. Far from rewarding terror, Israel would be viewed as reinforcing Hamas moderation while bolstering Abbas and Fatah.

Contrary to popular belief, Hamas is not a monolithic movement. It is divided into two factions, a hardline group with leaders in Damascus and Gaza who spout the familiar anti-Israel rejectionist cant, and a more pragmatic contingent, with leaders based largely in the West Bank. The pragmatists have suggested that Hamas is prepared to recognize Israel and reach a long-term armistice.

Hamas is reportedly working on a new charter which will remove anti-Semitic references and authorize a decades-long truce with Israel. While it may still pay lip service to the dream of Greater Palestine, the new platform will sanction a long-term accommodation with Israel based on a two-state formula. Sheikh Hassan Yussuf, a top Hamas leader in the West Bank, has said: "We can dream about all Palestine being Muslim – like some Israelis dream of a Greater Israel that includes all our lands – but it is not practical. We must take responsibility, along with Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority, in taking care of our people. And that means we must negotiate with the Israelis. God created people to live, not to die. We must find an exit. We need a dialog of civilizations, not a clash of civilizations."

Power may sooner or later accelerate Hamas pragmatism. Facile analogies to Hezbollah's supposed failure to moderate vis-à-vis Israel, as its political role in Lebanon has grown, are misplaced. Hezbollah, for one thing, is not the ruling party in Lebanon as Hamas is in the West Bank and Gaza. And the forces operating on Hamas, which is heavily dependent on Israel to accomplish its domestic goals for Palestinian government and society, are radically different than those impinging on Hezbollah. Palestinian Prime Minister Ismayil Haniyeh acknowledged recently that Hamas will in time "suit its positions to reality and change." Perhaps Israel can act to bring that time nearer.

Gidon Remba, co-author of the forthcoming "From Gaza to Jerusalem: A New Road to Middle East Peace?", served as senior foreign press editor and translator in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office during the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David peace process.