

Bush Reaction to Palestinian Election Results

Talk of the Nation: January 26, 2006

[🎧 Bush Reaction to Palestinian Election Results](#)

NEIL CONAN, host:

From NPR News in Washington, D.C., I'm Neal Conan and this is Talk of the Nation.

After Hamas won a landslide victory in Palestinian elections yesterday, President Bush said today that the United States will not deal with the group until it renounces its desire to destroy Israel. He then reflected on the meaning of yesterday's vote.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: I'm not surprised if people say let's get rid of corruption. If government hadn't been responsive, I'm not the least bit surprised that when people say I want government to be responsive. And so, it was an interesting day yesterday in the, as we're watching liberty begin to spread across the Middle East.

CONAN: We'll recap the president's news conference and talk with experts in Washington, Ramallah and Jerusalem. Palestinian elections and the future of the Middle East is the Talk of the Nation after the news.

This is Talk of the Nation. I'm Neal Conan in Washington.

Official results from yesterday's Palestinian elections show that Hamas won an absolute majority in parliament with 76 seats to 43 for Fatah. Prime Minister Qureia has resigned and called on Hamas to form a new government; to describe that as a shock would be an understatement.

We're going to focus for most of this hour on what happened and what it means. If you have questions on that, our phone number is 800-989-8255, that's 800-989-TALK. You can also send us email talk@NPR.org is our address.

But we begin here in Washington where President Bush held his first news conference of the New Year earlier today. He issued a capsuled description of next week's state of the union message, and took questions on: the Middle East, on lobbyists, nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, plans to rebuild New Orleans, on the budget, and once again, he staunchly defended the legality and necessity of warrantless wiretaps.

His critics describe this as illegal domestic espionage. The president prefers terrorist surveillance program.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: We believe there's a constitutional power granted to presidents, as well as this case, a statutory power. And I'm intending to use that power. Congress says go ahead and conduct the war, we're not going to tell you how to do it. And part of winning this war on terror is to understand the nature of the enemy and to find out where they are, so we can protect the American people.

There's going to be a constitution -- there's going to be a legal debate on whether or not I have the authority to do this. I'm absolutely convinced that I do, our attorney general has been out describing why. And I'm going to continue using my authority, that's what the American people expect.

Michael Duffy joins us here in Studio 3A. He's assistant managing editor of Time Magazine. Thanks for coming in, Michael.

Mr. MICHAEL DUFFY (Assistant Managing Editor, Time Magazine): You bet.

CONAN: This is the third time this week the president has spent a fair amount of time on this wiretap policy. And while he may be absolutely convinced that it's legal, there are a lot of people who disagree with him.

Mr. DUFFY: That's right. I think what you're seeing here is amassing of armies on both sides of what is going to be a fight, and may be a negotiation and may be both. The president knows that the Congress would really like to do something here to sort of curtail this power grab. There are senators this week talking about a constitutional amendment. The White House has hinted, as recently as yesterday, perhaps we can codify some of this in legislation.

Now, that's a real indication that they know that they're going to get cut back on this in some fashion. And so, the president has to come out all week long; he's given speeches, he's had his national -- he's had his attorney general give speeches. Michael Hayden who is the deputy director of the Center of National Intelligence has defended the practice.

They're really trying to build as much support for this so that when Congress then comes back and says okay, now let's actually see what we can do to curtail this practice, they're at full strength. And there's a tug of war going on. It's going to go on for a while. He almost said it to day in the press conference. He said, There is talk of a constitutional amendment. He knows that this is going to be fight through the rest of the winter.

CONAN: Mm-hmm. And the Senate Judiciary Committee will be grilling Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez, what, week after next.

Mr. DUFFY: Yes, two weeks, February sixth. And this week Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania sent the attorney general a letter listing some things he'd like him to address that he did not hear or see in the speech that Gonzalez gave, I guess yesterday.

CONAN: Mm-hmm. Critics say this policy violates the 1978 FISA law, which provides procedure for secret wiretaps. And there were questions to the president today about why that wasn't adequate? And if so, why didn't he ask Congress to change it four years ago when he started it right after 9/11?

Mr. DUFFY: That's right. And he said, at first he said you know, he started right back at the beginning, right after 9/11. And he said you know, when we were attacked I went to all of my lawyers and all of my, you know, technicians in the snooping agency, the National Security Agency, and said what can we do that's different? He went back to that story he tells now on a regular basis.

What he doesn't really address in the press conference is why the law that was written, the FISA law, did not give him plenty of power and plenty of retroactive capability to go back and listen to these phone calls. He hasn't really addressed that question yet. Four or five people tried to do that today. He always sort of changes the subject a bit.

CONAN: And asked if, you know, Congress might revise the law to make it legal, he kept saying well, if in the process of drafting this law they're going to be given out information on what we were doing. And that would tip the enemy off to what we're doing. Huh?

Mr. DUFFY: Yes, interesting thing. I think where we're heading hear is a series of hearings; some public, some will clearly be behind closed. And he again, I think he was laying down the idea that if you're going to in anyway giveaway to the enemy a sense of how we'll snoop, or where we'll snoop or when we'll snoop, I'm not going to sign off on that.

But again, I think a bunch of this is shadow boxing. And I think that they will come to some kind of new arrangement on this. And I bet Bush will get a lot of what he wants because, as he showed this week depending on how you ask the question, the public doesn't really mind it that much.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Mr. DUFFY: It's narrow. It's not a big margin, but there is a margin of support for this depending on how you ask the question.

CONAN: But even if at this point Congress changes the law to make what he's doing now legal, doesn't that imply that what he had been doing for four years was illegal?

Mr. DUFFY: Yes, but I don't think you'll ever get him to admit that in a press conference anymore than you would. In fact, someone said aren't you breaking the law, or...

CONAN: Contravening the law...

Mr. DUFFY: Yes, circumventing. He jumped all over it in a press conference that was relatively short and marked, I thought, by a fair amount of humor on the president's part, he was very quick to jump on that and say no, that's not what's going on.

CONAN: A fair amount of humor. Part of it came out in response to a question by Martha Raditz, of ABC News, when she asked him why the White House would not release pictures that were taken of the president with now-disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Let's listen.

President BUSH: If you're asking about pictures, I had my picture taken with him, evidently. I've had my pictures taken with a lot of people. Having my picture taken with someone doesn't mean that, you know, I'm a friend with him or know him very well. I've had my picture taken with you.

CONAN: The president got off a couple of good lines about that. Later, a radio reporter as well. Picture decides it. Well, that's pretty easy for a radio guy to say.

Mr. DUFFY: Mm-hmm.

CONAN: But the point being, somebody else who was trying to get him to say all right, pictures is one thing. But there lists of who Jack Abramoff met with, what they talked about and the White House is not releasing that.

Mr. DUFFY: Yes, or when these meetings took place and what other meetings might have taken place around them in the White House, and who attended them. We saw in the Clinton administration oftentimes, a president might have a photo opportunity with a donor. But there would be meeting elsewhere around the same time in which real business was discussed. And I think that's where that story is going to go. Don't know what we'll find out.

The president, what made that whole back and forth funny about the photographs is nearly everyone in the pressroom, as I have; I've gone to Christmas parties and stood in lines whether it was President Clinton, or President Bush, or President Bush, senior, had their picture taken. And it means absolutely nothing.

So everyone is sort of aware that pictures can mean nothing. But we're also aware from experience that they can mean a great deal.

CONAN: And he said basically, just reading this between the lines, there's no investigative purpose to these. And if we released them it would just be embarrassing, so we're not going to release them.

Mr. DUFFY: Yes, he did say we're now also investigating what happened here. Which is I guess we knew that but he seemed to put a little more emphasis on it. He said, I think the best, most memorable moment of the press conference was sometimes it's the president's job just to shake hands and smile.

CONAN: Some more questions about releasing documents, this time to Congress. And this about what was going on in the White House before, during, and right after Hurricane Katrina.

Mr. DUFFY: Right. The Congress, a committee in Congress has asked to produce some, they're clearly warned about the possible effects, very specific effects in New Orleans about Katrina depending upon the size of the hurricane. There had been drills about this before and smaller hurricanes. In the last week there's been back and forth between Democratic senators and members in the White House about producing these documents.

This has not, and you can just see that the White House isn't going to give this up. What's odd is that they've asked for low-level, not low level, but senior members of the White House staff who by tradition in both parties never testify in Congress, to do so. I don't expect change there.

CONAN: Well, specifically, he was asked a question about why doesn't Mike Brown, the now-former FEMA director appear before Congress? It's not like he's too busy.

Mr. DUFFY: No. Nor is it possible for the president to compel him to testify now that he's left government service. I suspect Congress could do that but again over and over and all these times we see a Congress, one that's controlled by Republicans are very reluctant to investigate the Administration.

CONAN: And then to the major news story of the day and that, of course, the results of yesterday's Palestinian election. President Bush spoke cautiously about this. Let's take a listen.

President BUSH: I like the competition of ideas. I like people that have to go out and say, Vote for me and here's what I'm going to do. There's something healthy about a system that does that and so the elections yesterday were very interesting. On the other hand I don't see how you can be a partner in peace if you advocate the destruction of a country as part of your platform. And I know you can't be a partner in peace if you have, if your party has got an armed wing.

CONAN: Hamas, of course, still listed as a terrorist organization. The president says we will have no dealings with Hamas unless it renounces its desire to destroy the State of Israel. And yet he also talked about liberty spreading in the Middle East. Is this a case of be careful of what you ask for?

Mr. DUFFY: It's a case of walking a very careful line because if you had to sort of reduce the Bush foreign policy to a doctrine, it's the spread of democracy, particularly in the Middle East.

He's had, he's helped, you know, caused elections in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He's called for the beginning of elections in Egypt and Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, so when they have them in the Palestinian territories, he can't exactly come out and say, Well, that's a bad thing. But he has to live with the results and that's what he was doing today; walking the line, praising the elections on one hand and saying, But this isn't a party I can do business with yet.

CONAN: He was though pretty critical of the previous Palestinian leadership Fatah and said, look is this a surprise? It's not a surprise to me if there was corruption. If they don't respond to the needs of the people, it should come as a surprise to no one that they get voted out.

Mr. DUFFY: It was a little hard to tell. He wasn't using names. He didn't use Fatah's name or Hamas' in the answer to that.

CONAN: Called it the old guard.

Mr. DUFFY: Yeah he did as I heard him talking about say the Chicago machine. You know.

CONAN: Democratic machine.

Mr. DUFFY: Right, he said you know honest government, better services, he says it was a wake up call to the old guard. So yeah for a minute I thought you know he was talking about you know an election here in our country. And there's some truth to that. I mean, this is a good question for Dennis Ross. But I do think they are trying to walk a line between being for democracy and principle and in practice and then figuring out how they deal with these new ruling groups when they emerge.

CONAN: Yep and he's sort of was able to dodge the question today: How are you going to respond to the new government? Well, there isn't a new government yet and he's right; the consultations are still under way. But this is going to be a major problem for the administration. The whole Middle East peace process, where does it go now?

Mr. DUFFY: Right and you know it's not as if he spent, he hasn't yet, as president invested a great amount of time in the Middle East peace process the way our previous presidents have. And it's unclear yet, he didn't look today like he was ready to but he also seemed to be biding his time before making a more definitive statement, waiting to see what the new leaders, whoever they are in the Palestinian territories emerged. And he's trying clearly not to do anything to make things worse today.

CONAN: If you'd like to hear the entire news conference from this morning and find coverage and analysis of the Palestinian elections, you can go to our Web site at NPR.org.

Michael Duffy, thanks very much for being with us today.

Mr. DUFFY: You bet, Neal.

CONAN: He mentioned Dennis Ross who is going to be here. He'll join us after the break when we focus on the future of the Middle East after yesterday's victory for Hamas. We'll also be talking with Hisham Ahmed and Dori Gold to get the reaction from Washington, Ramallah and Jerusalem to yesterday's events and today's news of a sweeping Hamas victory in those elections; 800-898-8255 if you have questions.

I'm Neal Conan, back after the break.

It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

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CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION; I'm Neal Conan in Washington.

The final tally won't be in for a couple of weeks, but the results are already clear: in a massive upset, the Islamic militant group Hamas won 76 seats in the Palestinian Parliamentary elections yesterday compared to Fatah's 43. Fatah had run the Palestinians for 40 years. Middle East politics have always been difficult to predict, but after yesterday's elections, even more so.

Here are a few of today's developments. Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia and his cabinet resigned even before official results were announced. The election does not automatically unseat President Mahmoud Abbas and President George Bush appealed to Abbas to stay on.

It's not yet clear what he will do. There are many more issues up in the air. We're going to try to shed light on some of them. If you have questions about the Palestinian election results and what they mean, you can join us. Our number is 800-989-8255 and our e-mail address is talk@npr.org.

Dennis Ross joins us now here in Studio 3A. Former Special Middle East Coordinator during several administrations and he's the author of *The Missing Piece: The Inside Story of the Fight for the Middle East*. He's currently a counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and thanks for joining us again on Talk of the Nation.

Mr. DENNIS ROSS (Author *The Missing Piece: The Inside Story of the Fight for the Middle East*): It's a pleasure.

CONAN: You just returned from Israel yesterday. How surprised are you and how surprised are they?

Mr. ROSS: I think all three of us are surprised. By that I mean, three, I spoke to the Palestinians

when I was there especially the younger (unintelligible) Fatah. I saw a significant number of Israelis as well and speaking with different observers from the outside. I think everybody assumed there were different possible outcomes for the election none of which envisioned this one.

There was certainly some who saw the possibility of a near dead heat and maybe a marginal advantage for Hamas. Those were the most pessimistic about what the results would be, vis-à-vis Fatah and Hamas. Put myself in that category. I heard others who thought it would be a five to ten percent victory for Fatah. And what we've seen is a real earthquake.

CONAN: I guess the, first the group most immediately affected is Fatah. This is an utter rejection.

Mr. ROSS: It is an utter rejection of Fatah. It's basically a statement that you had your chance and now it's time for something else and somebody else. And we don't really have any other organized opposition, therefore, we go for Hamas.

I think that's the point to bear in mind, not only in terms of the Israelis and the Palestinians, but we're going to find throughout the region as a whole. We're going to find people like President Mubarak saying you see I told you I was the bull worth against this as an alternative. Not saying, of course, that when you create the only possible organized opposition being an Islamist opposition that you rule out civil society alternative, a secular alternative a more liberal alternative. And that's in effect what we've now seen among the Palestinians as well.

CONAN: This will be an enormous challenge of course for Hamas who has always been an outsider insurgent group attacking everybody either rhetorically or physically. And now they're going to have to try to come through on some of the promises that they've made.

Mr. ROSS: One of the more interesting things again to put this in some perspective, Hamas didn't expect to win this way either. I mean the interesting thing is that Hamas had a strategy up until January 25th. They didn't have a strategy for afterwards because they thought they would be in a position where they would gradually be able to take over the Palestinian authority but it was a gradual process because they had no expectations. Now they have to deal with the consequences of their own success.

There will be dilemmas that they face, there will be choice they face and one other thing to understand there is an internal Hamas and there's an external Hamas. The two major polls are within Gaza and Damascus and the external Hamas has always been pushing even during the period of the Tajtia(ph) the truce to go back to the violence.

The internal Hamas is more sensitive to the feelings of the Palestinian public. So there's a difference there that will have to be sorted out but the more fundamental question that has to be dealt with if you're going and you're assuming power and you're facing a world that has at best

questions about you and at worst may decide to simply cut you off. You may have to think about what your choices are.

CONAN: We've already seen an announcement from Hamas today that they would continue to abide by the cease-fire as long as the Israelis did.

Mr. ROSS: Yeah, I'm not surprised by that. I think what they're going to put out what will be signs of tactical flexibility but they're going to resist. AS I think Mahmoud Zahari has any change in their charter, any sudden acceptance of the idea of co-existence with Israel in a strategic way.

CONAN: Let's get some listeners involved in the conversation. Again our number 800-989-8255, our email address is talk@npr.org. We'll begin with Maria; Maria calling from Cupertino in California.

MARIA (Caller): Hi, thanks for talking my call.

CONAN: Sure.

MARIA: I've got several levels of concern here. First is for the status of the Palestinian Christians. They find themselves sort of sandwiched in between living under Israeli occupation on the one hand and as a religious minority in the Middle East living with this rising tide of fundamentalism as well and the election of Hamas cannot go well for them.

Secondly, I'm concerned about how the United States is going to stay engaged in the region if we have said that we're not going to deal with Hamas. Are we going to be looking at a situation that we looked at in the early years of the Bush Administration when they were very much hands off in the Middle East and the peace process really and truly did disintegrate. And we saw basically the, you know, I don't want to say, the dissolution of the Palestinian authority; but it was very much under attack, to some extent, to their own faults as well for not being able to reign in the militants.

But the part of what happened yesterday can be laded to (unintelligible) at the basic, the evisceration of the Palestinian authority over the last few years. And that certainly impacted their ability to deliver.

CONAN: All right let's see if we get a response, Maria.

MARIA: Sure.

Mr. ROSS: Well, let me deal with both sets of your concerns and the first one was regard to Palestinian Christians. They will feel increasingly squeezed. It is true that Hamas tried to create the umbrella of some kind of broader front by actually including a few Christians on the list but I

think the average Palestinian Christian will look at this as making them much more isolated and much more under threat number one.

Number two on the issue of what the administration does and will they cut off Hamas and so forth. I mean I think it would be a big mistake to suddenly embrace Hamas because then the message is Hamas doesn't have to make any choices. They can preserve the same ideology. They can preserve the same attitudes and they don't have to change. The world adjusts to them. They don't have to adjust to the world.

There will be different strains and dilemmas with, and even debates within Hamas. They have all those that basically have been papered over until now. And it's very important that those who might have an inclination towards greater pragmatism understand there's no possibility of a relationship with the outside and you lose assistance as well if you're not prepared to sign up to certain basic criteria which include A: you accept coexistence. I mean if you're not prepared to accept coexistence there's a fundamental problem.

Bear in mind one thing: what has happened today turns the clock back to 1988. From 1988 until today, the leadership of the Palestinian people, whether it was before Oso(ph) or during Oso was based on a premise that they accepted a two state outcome. Hamas' charter is a one state outcome. So the clock has simply has suddenly turned back.

I would agree that American disengagement actually contributed to this because in a sense not so much the evisceration of the Palestinian authority. There were a lot of things the Palestinian authority could have done in the last year which they did not do. You can't blame corruption in the Palestinian authority on the Israelis or anyone else. You can't blame the absence of internal law and order on the Israelis or anyone else.

I mean, basic decisions that could have been made; reforms that could have been carried out were within the power of the Palestinian authority. The question of what they could have done versus terrorist groups, all right that might be something debatable in terms of what their capabilities were but the other issues were not. And the major part of the vote against them was precisely that they didn't deal with the needs of the Palestinian public.

Abu Masen was elected on a platform of nonviolence. He had a strong mandate himself. There was very little action taken to strengthen the Palestinian authority or show that it would deliver in terms of responding to the needs of Palestinians. I think we have to look at the last 14 months and recognize there were three significant historic developments each in of themselves could have created a basis in which to transform the situation much for the better.

Yasser Arafat died and there was no change possible as long as he was there. Abu Masen ran a platform of nonviolence and won dramatically, significantly. Ariel Sharon made a decision to get out of Gaza and carried it out. Take those three together; you should have been able to parley that into some dramatic change for the better. And the net effect in the aftermath of all this is that

Hamas is coming in.

So the level of effort from the outside I'm afraid wasn't there both to push the Palestinian authority to do the right things and also deliver for it at the same time so it could feel confident as it did and build its authority. Now I think you can't simply go back to business as usual or say, well, we're going to go embrace Hamas because you're going to have to somehow create a set of realities that gives Hamas a reason to change and for it to adjust. Not for the world to adjust to it.

CONAN: Maria, thanks very much for the call. Does Hamas, you can expect Hamas, this will be greeted with cheers in Syria and in Iran; but does Hamas, beyond the Arab world and of course Iran, not Arab, but do they have contacts in Europe? Will they be getting a better reception there? What about Russia? What about China?

Mr. ROSS: It's a very interesting question because they, right now the public posture of almost everybody on the outside is very similar. Hamas has to make adjustments, you have to give up violence, you have to commit to coexistent, you have to be peaceful.

I think we're going to find that the range of opinion is going to be on how strict the criteria are versus those who are prepared to accept more general kinds of slogans and accept the fact that for example when Hamas says, Well we'll accept an extension of the Tajtia the truce. That should be somehow good enough and we have to begin to deal with them at a practical level. I think the debate will be very much over do you engage or not engage and if so, what are the conditions or circumstances for doing so?

Again, I would say at this point, if one wants to create an incentive on Hamas's part to adjust the way I think it will have to, for the standpoint of Palestinian interests, the more clear and concrete we are in terms of how they have to adjust, the more likely you are to get that. Otherwise, given their own, I think, fissures at least on basic principles, you're bound to see those who are more hard line say, look, all we have to do is massage these a little bit and we can stay where we are.

And I think, as I said, turning the clock back to 1988 ought to establish some first principles. Is there a belief and acceptance of a one-state solution, versus a two-state solution? If it's a one-state solution, we don't have anything to do with you...

CONAN: '88, of course, was when PLO changed its charter and accepted the two-state solution.

Mr. ROSS: Exactly. So, I think, that's a starting point.

CONAN: Joining us now on the line is Hisham Ahmed. He's a professor of political science at Birzeit University. He joins us by phone from the Palestinian city of Ramallah on the West Bank. Thanks very much for being with us tonight.

Professor HISHAM AHMED (Professor of Political Science, Birzeit University, Ramallah, West

Bank, Palestine): My pleasure, sir.

CONAN: Were you surprised?

Prof. AHMED: Well, the results of the elections were certainly shocking by all accounts. It was a decent, clean elections, but certainly there were a lot of unexpected results for many people. To me personally, as somebody who has been reading Hamas and dealing with it for many years, the results were unfortunately not surprising. I have forewarned in the past, especially key decision makers within Fatah and with the PA, that if the trend continues the way it was, my fear is that we would have even more sweeping results than we saw yesterday.

Certainly there were internal reasons and external reasons for this historic moment in Palestinian society. Externally, certainly, the oppressive measures, the continuation of the oppressive measures of the Israelis have helped radicalize Palestinian society, especially that the political process has not succeeded in catering to the expectations, the hopes, and the demands of the Palestinians.

Internally, however, the rampant corruption, the misadministration, the mismanagement which has hurt Palestinians so immensely, I think has also helped radicalize the society. For many Palestinians, if you were to talk to them on the street, even non-Hamas members, non-Hamas supporters, they would say, for goodness sakes, how can we tolerate to have four family members having very high positions in the PA like director generals or key positions, while the rest of the people are almost destitute?

I think we have to read these results very carefully, we have to draw the lessons, and I believe that there has to be a serious change in the policy formation, formulation domestically and externally in order not to let this sweeping development become a fixed state of affairs. Secularism, I believe, can be revitalized in Palestinian society.

There are all the ingredients, if things are done correctly, but to continue with the same present, my fear is that we may have to look at a more radicalized, post-Hamas era, unless we really make some serious changes, unless the tools are also changed, and the discourse in dealing with the question of Palestine at this very critical stage is really changed. This is a historic moment which needs to be read very carefully and very strategically indeed.

CONAN: We're talking with Dennis Ross and Hisham Ahmed about the results of the Palestinian elections. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And let's get another caller on the line. This is Joe, Joe is calling us from here in Washington, D.C.

JOE (Caller): Hello?

CONAN: Hi, Joe. You're on the air. Go ahead, please.

JOE: I was wondering if Mr. Ross could comment on whether he thought Hamas had the on-ground power to be able to bring the al-Axa Brigades and the Islamic Jihad under control with their new election.

Mr. ROSS: I believe the answer to that is, if there is a kind of consensus among Palestinians now that you have to bring everybody under control, then I think you can see a capability to act against them. One point to make, to understand: even in the Palestinian authority as it existed until today, there was a capability to act on security measures, certainly internally and I would even say externally, if there was a political will from the top and there was an unmistakable readiness to take those actions.

Many of the security organization heads, many of whom I know, were prepared to take steps even the last couple of years, more dramatic steps than people might have imagined, but they were always concerned that they would get no backing, and they didn't want to go out on a limb and not have a kind of legitimacy for their actions. So, the key is, can you create a political legitimacy for the actions that are taken?

In the case of Hamas, Hamas is very disciplined. I think part of the attraction of Hamas to the Palestinian public that is living in a lawless society with tremendous chaos, with the kind of corruption that Hisham was making a reference to, they looked at Hamas and said, well, they're clean and they're disciplined and they won't tolerate armed thugs doing what's going on right now. So I suspect that Hamas, one of its, certainly part of its agenda is going to be to show that life is going to be different on every measure, including that one.

CONAN: I wondered if you had a thought about that, Hisham Ahmed.

Prof. AHMED: I fully agree with what Mr. Ross said, on the conclusion he actually drew. Hamas will try to project the best kind of image, especially to the local constituency here. But certainly, their focus will be on domestic issues, on health, on education, on the economy, in their own way, of course, and they will try to continue to sustain the popular legitimacy they have acquired and the political legitimacy they have acquired also yesterday, especially with the results of the elections.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Prof. AHMED: However, there is always a chance for Fatah in particular, being the largest, the oldest, the most historic movement in Palestinian society, to be revitalized if the tools are changed. In other words, we'll either have to look at the serious underlying causal factors which have led us to this kind of result. If we do so, I believe there can be very healthy competition with Fatah, with Hamas, at this critical stage, and the trend can be reversed. It's never, it's never too late; it's never impossible. But there has to be a convergence of different factors and different

serious players to be involved, to look at the matter very seriously and very strategically.

Let me just give you maybe one...

CONAN: I'm going to have to ask you to hold that, that thought until after the break because we're, we're running up against a clock here. So, Joe, thank you very much for the call, and Dennis Ross, we know you have to run to another appointment. We thank you very much for joining us here today.

Hisham Ahmed will be with us when we return after the break. We'll also be joined by Dori Gold, a former advisor to Prime Minister Sharon to get the view from Jerusalem, and what, how they think the next few days, weeks and months ahead are going to be like. Again, 800-989-8255 if you'd like to join us. I'm Neal Conan, this is NPR News.

SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. And here are the headlines from some of the other stories we're following here today at NPR News.

New mine safety legislation has been signed into law in West Virginia. Governor Joe Manchin says he wants the law to help prevent future accidents, like the two that have killed 14 miners in that state this month.

And Los Angeles is grappling with what may be the largest homeless population of any major city in the country. A new study shows that thousands of homeless people are avoiding crime-plagued areas in L.A. and seeking better, safer lives in affluent neighborhoods away from the city.

Details on those stories, and of course much more, later today on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News.

Today we're talking about what's next in the Middle East in the wake of yesterday's landslide election victory for Hamas. Our guest is Hisham Ahmed, a professor of political science at Birzeit University. If you'd like to join the conversation, our number is 800-989-8255. Our email address is talk@npr.org. And let's get another caller on the line. This is Peter, Peter is with us from Minneapolis.

PETER (Caller): Yeah, hello?

CONAN: Go ahead, Peter.

PETER: Uh, yeah, my question is that we should, you know, this is actually maybe a positive thing in one sense in that, you know, now people are going to have to take responsibility, but

also that, you know, we have lessons from like the, what happened in Ireland, in Northern Ireland. That when you give people a chance to participate, it kind of changes their outlook and, you know, maybe there is hope for this, after all, if we just say no to terrorism and yes to democratic participation, and let's give these people at least somewhat of a chance to redeem themselves.

CONAN: Hisham Ahmed, is, do you see that as a likelihood, a possibility for Hamas, in, in the days, months or years ahead?

Prof. AHMED: It will certainly take some time. Certainly the moment can be seized, if the political process is moved forward. In other words, if a deal were to be struck, let's say, with the most radical movement in Palestinian society, i.e., Hamas, certainly that will make it a more permanent, more enduring kind of deal because it will reflect the will of the Palestinian people represented in their voting yesterday through Hamas.

But I think it will take some time and it will take a lot of working out on the part of all involved: Palestinians, Israelis, the international community, and the Europeans, as well. It won't happen overnight, I believe.

CONAN: And it seems unlikely that talks, or at least any kind of public talks, could get underway until, until Hamas does issue public changes to its position.

Prof. AHMED: That's certainly true and I would also add to this that in the minds of many Palestinians, that's how a, an average Palestinian would think. He who is drowning might never be fearful of the rain. That is to say that because there was no successful political process for the past ten years, not much can really change as far as they are concerned, so there has to be some drastic, dramatic changes, I believe, in the policy formulation in dealing with the Palestinian question in order, I believe, to lead Hamas, to make these changes.

It's, it's a half, it's a two-way street, and I think the atmospherics can be created indeed to try to attain such changes on the part of Hamas, if there is no more squeezing out of the Palestinians into the corner. If there is, my fear is that we would make this kind of atmosphere that Hamas dominates more permanent than we would like to see.

CONAN: Peter, thanks very much for the call. Another critical voice, of course, in this story is in Israel. Dori Gold joins us now, former advisor to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He is currently president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and he joins us now from his home in Jerusalem. Thanks very much for taking the time to speak with us tonight.

Mr. DORI GOLD (Former Advisor to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon; Current President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs): My pleasure.

CONAN: What was your reaction when you heard the news?

Mr. GOLD: Well, I think everyone was completely stunned and surprised in Israel, among the Palestinians themselves. I think what we have to understand is, what's the starting point for any possible transformation of Hamas? And frankly, I think the previous speaker was pretty accurate to talk, in terms of talking about a very long transformation.

Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Muslim Brotherhood is presently illegal in Egypt, although there are independent candidates who identify with it. It is viewed by many in Arab society as one of the wellsprings of modern terrorism. Ayman al-Zawahri came out of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; Sheikh Abdullah Azzam came out of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and he was, of course, the mentor of Osama bin Laden.

So, we are dealing with an organization, which really is linked and identifies with many of the regional Islamist groups in the Middle East. For them to shift, to become a political partner in any peace process renouncing violence, recognizing Israel, changing their charter, is a huge leap.

Now, one of your questioners also asked about the analogy with Northern Ireland, because after all, the Blair government brought the IRA into the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. As some British spokesmen like to say, well, just as we brought the IRA into the peace process in Ireland, why can't you bring Hamas into the peace process in the Middle East? The big difference is that the IRA wanted to evict the British from Ireland.

They didn't want to destroy London. They didn't want to eliminate Great Britain or the British Crown. In the case of Hamas, its charter just doesn't call for the evacuation of Israel from parts of the West Bank or the Gaza strip, but rather for the elimination of Israel. And therefore, the ideological leap and the ideological transformation that's involved for Hamas to become a part of a political process with Israel is a very, and large leap.

CONAN:

Here's an email question we got from Nate, in Cincinnati. How will Hamas's gains in the election alter...excuse me, this is the wrong one. I'll get to Nate's question in just a minute. I wanted to get to Thomas's question. How will the Hamas victory effect the upcoming Israeli elections? Does this hurt Kadima and help Likud?

Mr. GOLD: Well, you know, that's sort of the quick, conventional wisdom, that the Hamas victory will harden the Israeli position. But nobody is certain. One thing is clear; all the main political parties have a serious problem with Hamas. None of them will negotiate with an organization dedicated to Israel's destruction.

Also, all Israel has observed how the head of the political bureau of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal, just met in Damascus last week with the President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the fiery, anti-Israel President of Iran; who has been calling for Israel to be wiped off the map of the earth.

CONAN: And called the Holocaust a myth.

Mr. GOLD: And called the Holocaust a myth. So if this is Hamas' ally, and we know that Iran has been financing Hamas, its main organization that it backs among the Palestinians is the Islamic Jihad, but it is also a major donor to the Hamas organization, then the regional diplomacy in the Middle East certainly is reinforcing more extremism on the part of Hamas rather than any trend towards moderation.

CONAN: Let me put this question to you both, and Dori Gold, if you would start first. And that is, if there is no negotiations possible with people who are so diametrically opposed, what will happen, what's the alternative?

Mr. GOLD: Well I think there's a very serious crisis with the Palestinian people. I mean they're the first ones that are going to suffer for this choice. And it's very unfortunate. I mean, Western donors are going to be put into a dilemma; can you give money to a Palestinian authority run by Hamas when Hamas can divert that to build up its military capacity, which will be used to support terrorist operations?

And so, what happens if the whole world cuts off the Palestinian authority? What happens to the everyday lives of the Palestinians? Now, maybe many in the Fatah movement are thinking, Here, we'll show them Hamas can't lead the Palestinians. They'll create a disaster and we'll come back into power, which is probably why many in Fatah don't want to join the Hamas government.

But clearly, we have a major Middle Eastern crisis on our hands; first and foremost for the Palestinians, but also for Israel.

CONAN: And, Hisham Ahmed.

Prof. AHMED: Well, indeed, all forces should join together, as I said earlier, to try to reverse this trend, try to give hope to the secular movement in the Palestinian society and in the Middle East at large. In order to do so, there has to be a clear-cut political horizon that the Palestinians should be offered. One that would make them feel that moving and shifting towards this radicalization would not do them good.

Secondly, on the question of financial aid, it's a most touchy and critical issue indeed. Certainly there can be some limitations on the laws of countries to help, refer aid, if it were to be dominated, let's say, by Hamas, for all sorts of reasons. However, the question should be dealt with, I think, more strategically. In the sense that that financial aid should perhaps be channeled through non-governmental organizations, but ones that are completely different from the ones that existed before; because those that existed before were not able, I believe, to rise up to the challenge, let's say, of the strength of Hamas over the past seventeen years.

There has to be work expended on NGOs that are serious, that are controlled by individuals who are credible, who are popular in the society, who are known to have clean hands, not to be corrupt. If that were to be done, I believe, that would be a balancing out posture, to try to reverse the trend and to try to revive secularism in Palestinian society. Particularly within Fatah, and that is never impossible if it is done correctly.

CONAN: I mentioned earlier an email question from Nate, in Cincinnati. This has to do with regional issues, which Dori Gold was talking about just a minute ago. How will Hamas' gains in this election effect the Palestinian relationship with the rest of the Islamic world? How is Hamas regarded in places like Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia? Well, we do know already it's been cheered in Iran, but, well, Hisham Ahmed first, and then a little bit more from you on this point, Dori Gold, if you would.

Prof. AHMED: Well, very briefly, I mean this is a very resounding development, indeed. If it is left unchecked, and if it is left unread, and (unintelligible) if it is very strategically and very carefully, the rise of Hamas in Palestinian society in this manner, I think, will help other Islamic movements in the Middle East. I don't have misgivings as to Islam itself per say, but as to the politicization of Islam, so to speak. Therefore, a success here is bound to breed successes in other places as well, especially in a region that is closely affected by inter-developments between its various parts.

And this is why I emphasize that the question should be really sorted very carefully, and very strategically, and to move away from the old trend of dealing with this issue, because the old trend obviously has not paid off. It has created a lot of protest towards Palestinian society, as we saw yesterday, but all those who voted yesterday for Hamas are certainly Hamas members or Hamas supporters. Many of them were trying to send several messages internally into the region and externally as well.

CONAN: Dori Gold?

Mr. GOLD: Well, you know, several months ago, Mahmoud al-Zahar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, made a statement about Hamas's victories against Israel. He said, Let them reinforce the Mujahadin in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Hamas sees itself as part of the global Islamist movement. It doesn't engage in terrorist operations against the West, it doesn't attack New York, or attack London, like al Qaeda. But it shares the same religious orientation.

Many of the al Qaeda Sheikh's from Saudi Arabia, like Sudhiman al-Arwan(ph) appear on Hamas websites, appear in textbooks that are in the hands of Palestinian in Hamas schools in the Gaza Strip. So there is a certain identification with these movements and they will undoubtedly feel emboldened by this victory.

I would also like to pick up something from your Palestinian speaker, previously, about democratic change and what maybe has to be done now. I agree with him. If you find the right

non-government organizations that don't deal in politics but deal with assisting the Palestinian people, it may be extremely important to reinforce those in the period ahead.

It seems to me that there's been a conceptual error about democratization in the Middle East. Everybody thinks democracy is election; but democracy is a creation of civil society, a free society, freedom of the press, separation of church and state or mosque or state. And, I think what, I think what the world has to do is help the Palestinians move in that direction, assuming that's what they want to do. And, I believe, then, at the end of the road, when you get to election, you will begin to elect parties that believe in the democratic process; that don't just use democracy to get elected in order to dismantle it the next day.

CONAN: Thanks for that, and, Hisham Ahmed, we wanted to thank you for your time today.

Prof. AHMED: It's my pleasure sir, anytime.

CONAN: Hisham Ahmed, Professor of Political Science at Birzeit University, joined us from Ramallah, on the West Bank.

You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION, on NPR News. And let's see if we can get another caller in. Jim, Jim's calling from Redding, in California.

JIM (Caller): Yeah, uh, can you hear me okay?

CONAN: Yes, you're on the air. Go ahead please.

JIM: Oh, okay. I'm one of them that would like to see a really positive outcome from this, but I have this real cynical question. What's the possibility of Hamas getting people, you know, now that they have power, to put on a guise of cooperating with the International community, getting people in to access the leaders and locations that they would, you know, normal terrorist networks would not be able to get into, and, they're patient people, they could do this over years, to make their attacks anyway? I hate being that cynical, but, it just seems that there's a whole lot of area where trust has to be built here.

CONAN: Dori Gold, I don't think Jim is the only person having such thoughts today.

Mr. GOLD: Well, I'm not sure I understand Jim's question.

CONAN: I think he's worried about if Hamas, or a Hamas-led Palestinian authority, could become a terrorist state?

Mr. GOLD: Oh, that is a very real concern. I mean, I'll give you an example. All Israeli Prime Ministers have said it's extremely important for Israel to continue to control the Jordan valley that separates Israel from Jordan and the Arab east. We know from communications from Abu

Musab al-Zarqawi and Ayman al-Zawahri that they have decided to transfer the center point of Jihad from Iraq to the neighboring secular state on Iraq's border, namely Jordan and Syria. And we've seen and escalation of terrorist activity by al Qaeda in Jordan in the last six months; particularly the triple suicide bombing in Amman, in November.

Now, should Israel unilaterally pull out of the Jordan valley, I can guarantee the next day Zarqawi's forces would be moving into the West Bank to try and link up with Hamas, and we'd have a full-blown terrorist entity.

Already that's likely to happen. In the Gaza Strip, when Israel got out and withdrew from the Gaza area and lost control of the Gaza-Egyptian border, al Qaeda came in from Sinai and now has a presence in the Gaza region. So, we have to make extremely careful, we have to be very careful not to allow that process to replicate itself in the West Bank with Hamas and the control of Palestinian cities. We have to maintain defensible borders for Israel so that that kind of incursion doesn't develop.

CONAN: Dori Gold, again thank you for your time today. We appreciate it.

Mr. GOLD: My pleasure.

CONAN: Dori Gold, a former advisor to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, currently President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and he joined us tonight from his home in Jerusalem, of course tonight, in Jerusalem time.

More on this later today on NPR News, so stay tuned for developments as they occur. I'm Neal Conan. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION, from NPR News. Copyright ©2006 National Public Radio®. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to National Public Radio. This transcript may not be reproduced in whole or in part without prior written permission. For further information, please contact NPR's Permissions Coordinator at (202) 513-2000.

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