

Power Will Not Moderate Hamas By: Martin Kramer
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This op-ed appeared in the March 27, 2006 edition of Bitterlemons.org, a website that presents Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints on prominent issues of concern. It ran alongside three other op-eds on the new Hamas government, by Hisham Ahmed, Yossi Alpher, and Ghassan Khatib.

The election of Hamas has prompted an epidemic of self-induced amnesia among pundits who interpret Palestinian politics. For years they argued that Israel should do everything to bolster Yasser Arafat, and later Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), lest Hamas gain ground. Hamas would grow if Israel did not make far-reaching concessions, thus destroying any prospect of a negotiated peace.

But now that Hamas has assumed power, these very same pundits ooze reassurances that Hamas is a partner for Israel after all. True, it has yet to recognize Israel, renounce violence, or dismantle its clandestine "military wing". True, it declares openly that it will do none of those things. But this is mere rhetoric, insist the pundits. Now that Hamas is in power, it will have no choice but to accept Israel de facto.

The problem with this interpretation is not that it ignores the past history of Hamas. The problem is that Hamas acquired power too easily. It has never sat in opposition, joined a larger coalition, or acquired the habit of compromise.

Hamas entered parliament with an absolute majority in its first election. It has achieved, in 20 years, what the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has not achieved in 80 years. Turkey's Islamists, regarded as the model of Islamist moderation, came to power only after decades of up-and-down parliamentary politics.

Hamas, in contrast, has never experienced any period of across-the-board suppression. Leaders of the movement were targeted by Israel, and some of its activists did time in Israeli prisons or were forced into exile. But Hamas has been largely free to organize, publish, acquire arms and launch attacks.

Islamist movements have been domesticated in strong states, where they have learned to interact with more powerful forces. But in the West Bank and Gaza, Arafat preferred struggle to state-building. Hamas accepted his nominal status as figurehead of the Palestinian cause, in return for almost complete freedom to do as it pleased.

Not only has Hamas assumed power on its first try. It has done so with its militia, its guns and its ideology intact. Its speedy and sweeping ascent has simply validated its past militancy.

Now, late in the game, the United States, Israel and Europe seek to extract from Hamas those gestures of acquiescence Hamas would not make when it was weaker. It is no surprise that Hamas evades them. Like Hizballah, it believes itself to have forced an Israeli retreat. It won a decisive electoral victory without parallel in the Arab world. And Hamas is convinced it enjoys the sympathy of millions of Arabs and Muslims, prepared to extend unconditional moral and financial support. Why should it bend?

Hamas will devote its rule to achieving three goals. First, it will seek to consolidate its grip over the institutions of the Palestinian quasi-state, at the expense of Fateh. Second, it will move gradually to Islamize Palestinian life. (Hamas will meet less resistance than secular observers think. Last year, a poll showed that two-thirds of Palestinians believe Islamic law should be the sole source of legislation.) Third, it will write its own "roadmap" in Palestinian consciousness, leading away from a two-state solution. For that purpose, Hamas will make the media and the schools into extensions of the mosques.

Hamas might continue the *tahdiya*, the informal "hold-your-fire", if Israel executes more unilateral withdrawals. But this process will slow or stop somewhere well short of the green line. Then, if not earlier, Hamas is liable to open space for "resistance"--terror which, to its mind, is the only language Israel understands.

The Hamas concept of victory through "resistance" not only delegitimizes Israel's peace with Egypt and Jordan. It undercuts the United States, which trades on its reputation as the only force that can deliver Israeli concessions. Israel, the US, Egypt and Jordan thus have a vital interest in seeing Hamas fail. So too does Europe, which has invested heavily in Palestinian civil society.

To make Hamas fail, the Palestinian electorate must be made to realize that, tough as life has been, Hamas is making it worse. If Hamas is allowed to feed the Palestinians both bread and illusions, the bread will sustain the illusions. Only a regime of targeted economic sanctions can break the cycle.

Palestinian pollsters tell us that Palestinian opinion largely favors negotiation with Israel. Hamas thus needs the illusion of a "peace process" created by desultory contacts with foreign governments and mediators. If Hamas is to fail, it must be denied any legitimacy for which it refuses to pay a price. That requires an effective diplomatic blockade.

Will Hamas evolve? History shows that Islamist movements change only when confronted with strong counter-forces. Hamas has never faced such forces; it must be made to face them now. Power will not moderate Hamas. The prospect of losing it just might.