

Democracy and Double Standards: The Palestinian “Exception”

By Stephen Zunes | December 27, 2005

At a time of year when Jews and Christians are celebrating the spirit of justice and peace inspired by events in the Holy Land many centuries ago, Congress has been working to insure that the Holy Land of today experiences neither.

Just prior to the Christmas recess, a bipartisan resolution in the House of Representatives and a letter signed by 73 of 100 Senators put Congress on record that the U.S. government, despite rhetoric to the contrary, does not take Middle Eastern democracy too seriously.

In recent months, Palestine Authority president Mahmoud Abbas has been trying to lure supporters of the radical Islamist group Hamas away from terrorism by allowing Hamas’ political wing to participate in the political process. In response, Congress has rushed in to pressure the Palestine Authority to bar them from participating. On December 16, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 397-17 in favor of a resolution introduced by Republican Congressman and Deputy Majority Whip Eric Cantor chastising the Palestinians for allowing the political wing of Hamas to take part in the forthcoming parliamentary election. Cosponsors of the resolution included Democratic Congressman (and recently appointed New Jersey Senator) Robert Menendez, Republican Congresswoman Iliana Ros-Lehtinen, and Democratic Congresswoman and House Minority leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

The resolution begins by claiming that “the foundation for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was Palestinian recognition of Israel’s right to exist and a solemn obligation to end terrorism and violence,” ignoring the equally important foundation of Israeli recognition of Palestine’s right to exist and for an Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories seized by Israel in the 1967 war. Similarly, the House of Representatives “reaffirms its commitment to the

safety and security of the democratic State of Israel” without also affirming its commitment to the safety and security of a democratic state of Palestine, yet another example of the bipartisan U.S. insistence that Israeli Jews somehow have more rights than Palestinian Arabs.

The resolution also seeks to undermine the “Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”—endorsed by the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations as the basis for peace talks—by deliberately misrepresenting it. For example, the bipartisan measure claims that “the first provision of the Road Map to Middle East Peace calls for the Palestinians to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure.” In reality, that anti-terrorism clause is just one of *twenty-four* provisions in Phase I, which also calls upon Israel to withdraw from areas of the West Bank seized from Palestinian Authority control since September of 2001, to freeze “all settlement activity, including natural growth of settlements,” and to dismantle all settlements erected since March 2001, which the right-wing Israeli government has thus far refused to do. Congress has never called upon Israel to uphold these and other requirements under the Roadmap, however, essentially arguing that it is those under occupation, not the occupiers, who are solely responsible for making the peace process work.

The resolution also criticizes Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for “his willingness to see Hamas participate in the elections without first calling for it to ... renounce its goal of destroying the State of Israel.” However, they do not similarly criticize Israeli



Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for his willingness to see parties, such as the National Union—which seeks to destroy any Palestinian national entity and expel its Arab population—to participate in Israeli elections, an apparent acknowledgement that while Israel’s survival is axiomatic, Palestine’s survival is an open-ended question. In any case, under the Palestinian Authority, as with the state of Israel, the head of government simply does not have the authority to ban a political party simply because of its ideology, however repugnant.

Similarly, the resolution goes on to assert that groups such as Hamas “should not be permitted to participate in Palestinian elections until such organizations recognize Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state.” Ironically, however, the United States allows a number of political organizations, such as the Socialist Workers Party—which also does not recognize Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state—to participate in U.S. elections. The U.S. Congress apparently believes that Arab nations should not be able to experience the same degree of democracy we enjoy in this country which allows even those with extreme views to seek political office.

Double Standards

In a similar example of double standards, the Senate letter declares that “No democracy in the world allows a political party to bear its own arms,” an ironic statement for a body that voted unanimously to praise the recently-completed Iraqi parliamentary elections in which a number of political parties with their own militias openly participated. In addition, the United Kingdom—America’s closest ally—allowed Sinn Fein to operate a legal political party and participate in elections even during the decades in which its armed wing, the Irish Republican Army, engaged in terrorist attacks against British citizens.

In parliamentary systems throughout the world, including U.S.-backed governments in Iraq and Israel, coalition governments have been formed which have sometimes included extremist elements. U.S. officials have defended their backing of such governments on the grounds that the ideology of a

minority party of such diverse coalitions is not representative of the government as a whole. However, in the recently-passed House resolution, the bipartisan majority argues that “the inclusion of Hamas ... into the Palestinian structure could be construed as an implicit endorsement of their anti-American and anti-Israeli terrorist ideology.” Both the House resolution and the Senate letter threaten an end of U.S. relations with the Palestine Authority if Hamas is included.

The liberal U.S. Zionist group Americans for Peace Now (APN) noted that while “The goal of eradicating terror and consolidating weapons in the hands of the legal [Palestinian] government remains,” it should *not* be “a prerequisite for democratic elections.” APN also noted the negative impact of the United States insisting that such measures be a prerequisite for ongoing U.S. relations with the Palestinians’ democratically elected body. They also observed how Israel had spent nearly three decades trying to defeat Hamas through military means alone and failed.

Congress, however, has rejected moderate voices among Israelis and their U.S. supporters, and has instead thrown its weight behind Sharon’s rightist government, which has threatened to disrupt the elections if Hamas is allowed to run. Ironically, Sharon announced last week that, regardless of which parties participate, Israeli occupation authorities would prevent Palestinian residents of Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem—long seen by the Palestinians as their capital—from voting. Since Jerusalemites tend to be more moderate than most other Palestinian voters, their exclusion would likely increase the numbers of Hamas supporters being elected to the Palestinian parliament.

New Electoral Insurgencies

Congress has thrown itself into internal Palestinian politics at a critical juncture. Young Fatah reformers led by Marwan Barghouti—currently held in an Israeli prison—are challenging Abbas and the corrupt Fatah old guard by organizing to run a separate slate. In addition, Hamas did unexpectedly well in recent municipal elections, though exit polls show that their

unexpectedly high vote total resulted more as a protest against Fatah's misrule than an endorsement of Hamas' extremist ideology. Polls also show that most Palestinians oppose Hamas' notorious armed wing, the Al Qassam Brigades, which have been responsible for a series of horrific terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians over the past decade and which has been outlawed by the Palestine Authority since 1996. Given that many Palestinians blame the United States for its failure to end Israel's 38-year occupation, Congress' recent anti-Hamas initiatives could boost the Islamist group's fortunes even more.

In addressing the threat from Hamas, both Republican and Democratic lawmakers join the Bush administration in confusing cause with effect. It has not confused many leading Israelis, however: Writing in the Dec. 19 *Jerusalem Post*, the noted policy analyst Gershon Baskin observed how "Israel's unilateralism and determination not to negotiate and engage President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority has strengthened the claims of Hamas and weakened Abbas and his authority which was already severely crippled by ... Israeli actions that demolished the infrastructures of Palestinian Authority governing bodies and institutions." Indeed, the PA still has not recovered from the devastating 2002 Israeli military offensive against its urban West Bank enclaves, an action roundly denounced by human rights groups and Israeli moderates but strongly endorsed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Congress.

President Bush and an overwhelming bipartisan majority of Congress have also thrown their support to Sharon's unilateral disengagement policy which, while withdrawing Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip, has expanded them in the occupied West Bank as part of an effort to illegally annex large swathes of Palestinian territory. In addition, neither Congress nor the Bush administration has pushed Sharon to engage in serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians, which have been suspended for nearly five years, despite calls by Abbas and the international community that they resume.

Given that the PA's emphasis on negotiations has failed to stop Israel's occupation and colonization of

large parts of the West Bank, it's not surprising that Hamas' claim that the U.S.-managed peace process is working against Palestinian interests has resonance, even among Palestinians who recognize that terrorism by Hamas' armed wing is both morally reprehensible and politically counter-productive.

Though Sharon and Congress are insisting that the Palestine Authority attempt to forcibly disarm the Al Qassam Brigades, the PA's weak and battered infrastructure combined with the widespread popular support for Hamas resulting from the PA's inability to end the occupation through diplomatic means makes such a scenario virtually impossible. This is what led to Abbas' strategy of allowing Hamas to participate in the parliamentary elections. This recent Congressional resolution opposing Abbas' initiative, then, is a means of giving the Israelis an excuse to not resume substantive peace talks with the Palestinians, thereby enabling Sharon to continue his creeping annexation of Palestinian territory in the West Bank. The U.S.-backed Israeli strategy is to limit PA-controlled land to a series of non-contiguous cantons surrounded by Israel, declare this unviable territory the Palestinian state, and declare Palestinian refusal to accept this imposed solution as evidence of their unwillingness to live in peace.

Baskin argues that one of the few initiatives Abbas may have to assert his credibility against the rise of Hamas is to reactivate Palestine's unilateral declaration of independence, made during the first and largely nonviolent intifada in 1988. Both the Bush administration and a large bipartisan majority of Congress is on record opposing formal Palestinian independence outside of terms agreed to by the Israeli government, however, arguing that rather than being an inalienable right, self-determination should be allowed only on conditions agreed to by the occupying power.

Undermining Democracy, Strengthening Occupation

The recent Congressional initiatives in respect to the Palestinian elections is part of a larger right-wing effort to undermine international legal principles

regarding foreign military occupation, human rights, and self-determination, and should be seen as part of the concerted Congressional attack against international law and human rights, also manifested by the bipartisan support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the granting of extraordinary war powers to President Bush.

Given that the overwhelming majority of Democrats supported these latest anti-Palestinian initiatives, it may also indicate that, should the Democrats take back Congress in next year's midterm elections, little change can be expected on foreign policy. Both parties seem to agree that international law, the right of self-determination, and open elections are not principles to be upheld universally, but should instead be encouraged or denied based upon narrowly-defined strategic interests.

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