

The Hamas Victory: Another Side to the Story

By Stephen Zunes | February 6, 2006

Lost amidst the predictably negative reaction to the victory by Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections is the crucial role that the U.S. government had in bringing the radical Islamist group to power.

Both Congress and the Bush administration are on record insisting that Hamas' virulent anti-Israel stance and the history of terrorist activities by its armed wing, the Al Qassam Brigades, gives Israel the right to refuse to engage or negotiate with the Palestinians. However, Israel had already suspended peace talks nearly five years ago without apparent objections from U.S. officials. A majority of Israelis, according to public opinion polls, had supported a resumption of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority under its outgoing secular government, but the administration and Congress continued to back the right-wing Israeli government's refusal to talk with its Palestinian counterparts on the implementation of the Road Map, a formula backed by the "Quartet" consisting of the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations.

Following the 2004 decision of the Bush administration and a huge bipartisan congressional



Hamas supporters on the left, with green flags, Fatah on the right with yellow flags.
Photograph: Laila el-Haddad (<http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/>)

majority to throw its weight behind Prime Minister Sharon's unilateral disengagement strategy in lieu of a negotiated withdrawal, many Palestinians saw the departure of Israeli colonists from the Gaza Strip as a result of Hamas' armed resistance, thereby giving them even less faith in a U.S.-led peace process.

Exit polls appear to indicate that had Palestinian voters believed that re-electing the more moderate Fatah movement would have allowed for the resumption of peace talks, they would not have backed the hard-line Hamas. Israel cut off negotiations with the Palestinians when right-wing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to office in February 2001, just one month after Israeli-Palestinian talks in Taba, Egypt came tantalizingly close to reaching a final peace agreement. The Israeli government, with apparent U.S. backing, has refused to resume negotiations ever since.

The Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority proved itself incapable of implementing the primary responsibility of any government: the protection of its own people. The PA could do little to resist the face of overwhelming power of Israeli occupation forces, particularly when backed by the world's one remaining superpower. Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority a little more than a dozen years ago, Israel has killed hundreds of Arab civilians, expropriated large tracts of land, bulldozed thousands of homes, built a 30-foot wall bisecting



large segments of the West Bank, and destroyed orchards, vineyards, and other farmland. In reaction, radical militias such as Hamas' Al Qassam Brigades have attacked Israeli occupation forces and settlers in the occupied territories and civilian targets inside Israel.

Congress and the administration have made it clear they will not provide any foreign aid to the Palestinian Authority unless Hamas renounces violence and recognizes Israel. However, the Israeli government's failure to renounce violence against Palestinians or rein in its settler militias, and its refusal to recognize a viable independent Palestinian state alongside Israel has never jeopardized the billions of dollars of foreign assistance given annually to the Israeli government by the United States.

Faced with endemic corruption and incompetence in areas of the West Bank under PA control under the leadership of Fatah's old guard, Palestinian voters apparently felt they had little to lose in electing Hamas. Though only a minority of Palestinians supports the terrorist activities of Hamas' armed wing or its reactionary social agenda, they were propelled by a perceived need to clean house. The secular democratic and progressive opposition to Fatah was divided into five different competing factions. Also greatly appreciated was the network of schools, medical facilities, and social services

provided by Hamas for the population suffering from the repressive military occupation and the often incompetent local governance under Fatah.

While rightfully condemning Palestinian terrorism, Bush administration officials and Congressional leaders of both parties have defended the Israeli government's assassination policy against suspected Palestinian militants despite its violation of international legal norms. In addition, the Bush administration, backed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Congress, denounced the International Court of Justice for its 2004 ruling calling on Israel to uphold its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention in the occupied West Bank. The Bush administration and Congress even went on record supporting Israel's devastating spring 2002 offensive in the West Bank, openly contesting reports by Amnesty International and other human rights observers which documented widespread civilian casualties and damage to the territory's civilian infrastructure. The Palestinian Authority lost many of its buildings and resources serving the population in those U.S.-backed attacks, a gap that was partly filled by Hamas.

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The limited amount of aid granted to the Palestinians by the United States generally bypassed the Palestinian Authority, and Congress this past

year actually mandated stricter standards for U.S. aid under the reform-minded president Mahmoud Abbas than it did under his notoriously corrupt predecessor Yasir Arafat. Virtually all aid to the occupied territories has gone through various non-governmental organizations.

President George W. Bush, in defending Israel's insistence that it will continue to refuse to negotiate with Palestinians, claimed that "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." In reality, Hamas had excluded such a reference in their electoral platform in an effort to appeal to more moderate Palestinian voters and explicitly expressed their desire to negotiate with the Israeli government. Hamas has also largely observed a unilateral cease fire against Israel for more than a year despite a series of assassinations of suspected Hamas leaders by Israeli forces.

Just as Hamas gained credibility with the Palestinian population through its social service programs, funded primarily by supporters in the U.S.-backed monarchies of the Gulf, it is possible that European and other supporters of secular, democratic civil society organizations would increase the prospects for those currents within Palestinian society to gain in strength. At the same time, a suspension of Western aid could lead the Palestinian government to become more dependent on the support of Iran and Saudi Arabia, which have backed radical Palestinian Islamists for decades.

Harvesting Cynicism

The refusal of the United States to deal with the elected Palestinian government will likely add to the cynicism within the Arab and Islamic world that the United States supports democratic

elections only if the results support U.S. policy aims. In December the U.S. House of Representatives, with only sixteen dissenting votes in the 435-member body, denounced Palestinian President Abbas for even allowing Hamas to participate in the election, another indication of the selectivity of American support for democracy in the Arab world.

The core issue, however, remains the Israeli occupation and the U.S.-backed Israeli government's refusal to allow for the establishment of a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel.

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when Palestinians saw the hope of a negotiated settlement under U.S. auspices fade.

The best means to stop terrorism is to deny the agenda which propels it, such as foreign military occupation. Indeed, as Great Britain belatedly recognized in Northern Ireland and in countless other examples, incorporating armed groups which represent a significant portion of the population—even

those which engage in terrorism—in the electoral process and in negotiations is a better way to end the violence than with your own violence.

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Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, “The Hamas Victory: Another Side to the Story,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, February 6, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3107>

Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

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