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Engagement as a Way toward Peace

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Engagement as a Way toward Peace

Abstract

The Bush administration's active support for the Israeli government is counterproductive in its refusal to recognize a Palestinian unity government which includes Hamas. A great majority of American Jews have called for Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967 and support the creation of a Palestinian state. A hard-line minority of politicians in the United States, along with their affiliated media networks and think-tanks, have continued to dominate the main Jewish lobbying group, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Keywords

Human rights, United States, Israel, Palestine, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)

Engagement as a Way toward Peace

by Mahmood Monshipouri

The Bush administration's active support for the Israeli government is counterproductive in its refusal to recognize a Palestinian unity government which includes Hamas. A [great majority of American Jews](#) have called for Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967 and support the creation of a Palestinian state. A hard-line minority of politicians in the United States, along with their affiliated media networks and think-tanks, have continued to dominate the main Jewish lobbying group, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). The pervasive influence of AIPAC in shaping U.S. foreign policy has systematically led to the denial of self-determination and statehood for the Palestinians. Some American scholars, such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, have argued that AIPAC's influence causes trouble on several fronts by increasing the terrorist danger, making it impossible to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and contributing greatly to Islamic radicalism in Europe and Asia. These consequences have many adverse effects not only for U.S. interests in the Middle East but also for the region as a whole.

Arguably, Israelis can live a normal life if their neighbors can equally enjoy a normal life as well. Increasingly, it has become clear that there are limits to military power and that the cardinal rule of diplomacy is that it is often more imperative to talk to your opponents than your friends. Hamas holds the key to so many problems in Israeli-Palestinian relations that it is necessary to find a way to come to terms with it. There cannot be any peace, cease-fire, or rapprochement with the Palestinians without the cooperation of Hamas.

The experience of being an oppressed people in the Occupied Territories has made the Palestinians' resistance a defensive marker of their identity, despite the presence of competing identities among them. The desire to gain independence has led to Hamas's active participation in politics, with its political wing pursuing diplomatic channels. Arguably, more moderate members of Hamas in the Palestinian unity government, including Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, can legitimately be brought into the peace process in an effort to render the process inclusive. Throughout the Muslim world, political parties that have Islamic roots have become more moderate after taking power on a national scale (as in [Turkey](#)) or after participating in the political process (as in [Morocco](#) or [Egypt](#)).

The exclusion of more moderate elements of Hamas, along with growing signs of economic deterioration in the West Bank and Gaza, is certain to further strengthen the hands of radical groups such as Islamic Jihad. Collective punishment of the Palestinians for their support of Hamas in national elections—especially after forming the national unity government—denies the very reality of the actual hardship under which many Palestinians live. Economic conditions have grown much worse in the aftermath of the [international economic boycott](#) of the government led by Hamas. According to the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP), the unemployment rate in Gaza is 39 percent and nearly 54 percent of 1.4 million Gazans suffer from [food insecurity](#). According to the same source, the WFP defines [the Palestinian poverty line](#) at \$2 per person per day. Those who suffer from food insecurity only have \$1.60 per day to spend.

This extreme stress has created cleavages between the Hamas armed underground movement and some of the more moderate political leaders who support the cease-fire, in the hopes of winning further international support for the unity government. There is a historic opportunity for the Bush administration to exploit the divisions between the military and political wings of Hamas. The Saudi-brokered truce between Iran-backed Hamas and the nationalist Fatah Party has created a unique opportunity for the reasonable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Because of the U.S. strategic alliance with Israel, the long-lasting and enduring solution for the Palestinian situation must come from a regional power such as Saudi Arabia. For a seismic political shift to happen, however, several factors must enter the play. The Bush administration must avoid AIPAC pressures to shape its foreign policy toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it must take advantage of the Saudi initiative. It is time to pay attention to the Saudi initiative, which has been in the works for some time but never seriously pursued.

Likewise, the militant elements of Hamas must recognize that they cannot win a violent struggle, that they must recognize Israel's right to exist, and that they must seek their goals through political means. Recently, in a case of comparable history and circumstance, the two fierce adversaries in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland agreed to a power-sharing government, due in large part to economic and political pressures.

At this point, the Bush administration lacks any foreign policy direction in the region. The question is: will it permit AIPAC to influence its policy, thus remaining clueless as to how to move toward the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or will it simply bank on the Saudi initiative as a new way of doing more to ultimately address this long-festering regional conflict? The U.S.'s unconditional support of Israel, to the detriments of the Palestinians' right to self-determination, has proven to be a costly policy. It must be recognized that such unequal treatment of the conflicting parties render the United States an impotent power when it comes to brokering a reasonable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dr. Monshipouri is a Professor in the Department of International Relations at San Francisco State University and currently a visiting fellow at the Yale Center for International and Area Studies. Dr. Monshipouri's publications include Islamism, Secularism, and Human Rights in the Middle East (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), and, more recently, the volume Constructing Human Rights in the Age of Globalization (eds. Mahmood Monshipouri, Neil Englehart, Andrew J. Nathan, and Kavita Philip, Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 2003).