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**The Hamas factor**

**Robert Malley and Henry Siegman**

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The latest American and European bid to revive the long-dormant Israeli-Palestinian peace process apparently goes something like this:

Tighten the squeeze on Hamas's government to curtail its acquisition of money and weapons. Tip the military balance by pouring in tens of millions of dollars to train and equip security forces loyal to Fatah. Strengthen the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, politically with the kinds of immediate, tangible concessions — money transfers, prisoner releases, lifting of roadblocks — mentioned by the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, at his dinner last Saturday with Abbas.

Then, the thinking goes, press the two sides to agree on a plan involving Israel's withdrawal from areas of the West Bank and creation of a Palestinian state, while conditioning implementation on a Palestinian government that recognizes Israel and renounces violence. Formalize that accord at a ceremony attended by American, European and Arab dignitaries, who would pledge substantial funding for the soon-to-be state.

By then, the choice before the Palestinian people will be clear: a life of isolation and hardship under Hamas, or potential peace and prosperity under a new, internationally backed government. Abbas will schedule early elections or a referendum. Hamas will resist. In the ensuing violent confrontation, Abbas — militarily bolstered and enjoying broad domestic support — will prevail.

The theory is elegant and appealing. It also is unworkable.

There is, to begin, the colossal suspension of disbelief — of reason, really — in which one is asked to indulge. In the next two years, the Bush administration would have to do what it has shown neither will nor capacity to accomplish in the past six: Focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, engage in skillful diplomacy and extract Israeli concessions. Israel would have to take significant steps under precarious security conditions and for the sake of an uncertain outcome.

Because none of this is likely to happen, even if Abbas's Fatah group were somehow to replace Hamas in this Western-scripted fantasy, Abbas would be handed his third betrayal by the United States and Israel. The first came when, under U.S. pressure, Yasser Arafat named him prime minister in 2004; the second came when he was elected to replace Arafat. On both occasions, promises were made. At the time of writing, Palestinians are still waiting.

But the far more dangerous assumptions relate to Palestinian political realities. A civil war — for that is what it would be — would spell disaster for the Palestinian people. The presidential guard might become a more formidable fighting force than Hamas, but it will remain a far less motivated one, seen by many as doing America's and Israel's bidding. In such a contest, success is far from assured, as we should know from Iraq, Lebanon and, indeed, Palestine itself.

Even assuming Fatah were to prevail, it would at most drive Hamas underground, leading it to resume suicide bombings and increase rocket assaults while retaining the loyalty of a committed rank-and-file. Does one seriously believe that a genuine negotiation process can emerge from a battered, polarized Palestinian society, renewed Palestinian violence and predictable disproportionate Israeli retaliation?

The most fundamental miscalculation of all is the notion that there can be a peace process with a Palestinian government that excludes Hamas. Hamas is not an ephemeral phenomenon that can be extinguished by force of arms. It is as permanent a feature of the Palestinian political landscape as Fatah, which means that no enduring change in relations between Israelis and Palestinians — and certainly no end to violence, or beginning of a political process, let alone meaningful Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank — can occur over its opposition.

There is an alternative, and though it, too, is uncertain, it is far less risky or bloody, and hardly has been given a chance. Hamas wants to govern effectively — that is, without a crippling international siege and Israeli military operations. Although it is not willing to formally renounce violence, it is prepared to abide by a comprehensive cease-fire, and has proved its ability to implement it when Israel fully reciprocates.

Hamas is willing to deal directly with Israel on day-to-day matters, indirectly on more substantive ones. It will acquiesce in negotiations between Abbas and Olmert and abide by any agreement ratified by popular referendum.

Hamas will not, however, recognize Israel. That's unfortunate. But is it really worth plunging the region into greater chaos because Hamas will not confer upon Israel the legitimacy the Jewish state is granted by virtually every nation in the world?

This alternative is one Abbas advocated from the start, which is why he chose to promote the Islamists' entry into political life in the first place and why he courageously resisted repeated pressure — foreign but also, sadly, domestic — to violently confront Hamas. His resistance, apparently, may be running out. Faced with Western inflexibility and Islamist obstinacy, he is being forced down a violent path for which he was not made and from which he is unlikely to survive as Palestinian leader.

Abbas still is uniquely qualified to form a unity government with Hamas and achieve a peaceful accommodation with Israel. Surely, that is a wiser course than the dangerous illusions peddled by Washington, which display as much understanding of Arab realities as did Bush's invasion of Iraq and would bring about the same catastrophic consequences.

*Robert Malley directs the Middle East program at the International Crisis Group. Henry Siegman is director of the U.S./Middle East Project and a visiting professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.*

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