

PolicyWatch #1359 : Special Forum Report

## The Hamas Dilemma: A Debate on Alternative Strategies

Featuring [Robert Satloff](#) and Robert Malley  
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*On March 19, 2008, Robert Satloff and Robert Malley addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Satloff is executive director of the Institute and editor of its 2003 compendium [Hamas Triumphant: Implications for Security, Politics, Economy, and Strategy](#). Dr. Malley is director of the International Crisis Group's Middle East program and former director of Arab-Israel affairs at the National Security Council. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

### ROBERT SATLOFF

After Hamas's electoral victory in January 2006, few would have predicted that all main international actors would have held fast to the Quartet's conditions for ending the group's exclusion from the diplomatic process. The remarkable durability of the international consensus underscores that there is no inevitability to Hamas's inclusion. Still, the State Department's website has posed the question of whether engaging Hamas would help or hurt the peace process, so permanent consensus is by no means inevitable either.

Most advocates of engagement (whether direct or indirect) fall into two camps. The first claims that in order to strengthen the position of Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas and thereby advance the Annapolis peace process, Hamas should be engaged in some fashion. Specific benefits of such an effort could include Hamas-Fatah reconciliation, a Fatah foothold along the Egypt-Rafah border, or intra-Palestinian unity. This argument is illogical and patronizing, however. Awarding a measure of diplomatic recognition to opponents of a two-state solution does not advance the cause of such a solution. Suggesting that Palestinians need unity to achieve diplomatic progress smacks of condescension; after all, Israel has repeatedly made historic national decisions by the narrowest of political margins (e.g., the 61-59 Knesset vote on the 1993 Declaration of Principles).

The second camp argues that engaging Hamas is essential because the group has proven its power, popularity, and ability to undermine any political process in which it is not accorded its rightful role. While more candid, this argument is sadly defeatist. A generation ago, the United States held fast to its position on the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO's) need to meet certain conditions for dialogue. Only after many years did the PLO become convinced that the United States would not budge, and only then did it moderate its position (even then, the United States acted too soon; it should have waited for the PLO to meet Israel's conditions for engagement). Why then should Washington relent on Hamas just two years after the Quartet defined its conditions?

An important contrast can be made between the internal PLO debate two decades ago and the debate inside Hamas today. The former debate (which may still not be fully settled) was between advocates of a phased plan to destroy Israel and advocates of a two-state solution. The Hamas debate, however, has no advocates of peace with Israel. Rather, it is between those who call for a *tahdiya* (brief lull in fighting) and those who favor a *hudna* (a longer-term armistice) -- neither of which approximates peace with, or even recognition of, Israel. Therefore, it is difficult to fathom why Hamas should be required to meet less onerous conditions for engagement than the PLO faced twenty years ago. The bottom line is that those who advocate engagement

must believe that Hamas is willing to be complicit in its own demise. This is folly.

The right course for policymakers begins with recognizing that peacemaking will take time. When progress does not appear swift and sure, it is only counterproductive to entertain new strategies. Instead, the United States should maintain confidence in the strategy it adopted after Hamas's Gaza putsch: investing in the West Bank's success and isolating the Hamas regime. In this regard, Annapolis was a step backward. Instead of investing in the twin projects of Palestinian capacity-building and economic development (the Blair mission) and developing security institutions (the Dayton mission), Washington changed gears in favor of a final-status agreement by the end of 2008. The dilution of U.S. efforts will almost surely mean that none of these goals are reached -- i.e., neither a diplomatic breakthrough nor progress on the ground in the West Bank. Hopefully, either the Bush administration or its successor will recognize that there are no shortcuts and return to a strategy that was aborted before it had time to achieve results.

As for the problem of rocket fire from Gaza, Israel will pursue its own response as it sees fit. This could range from reoccupying a slice of northern Gaza as a "security belt" to targeting individual Hamas leaders as a means of deterrence.

## **ROBERT MALLEY**

The appropriate policy debate is not about U.S. engagement with Hamas, because that is not on the table. For legal, political, and practical reasons, Washington is not about to engage the group. Besides, the notion that engagement is the ultimate political prize is a myth, as is the view that isolation and non-engagement are the ultimate punishments for "bad actors" on the international stage. In reality, engagement with any party should be viewed as one of many tools available to policymakers to advance strategic interests.

Any discussion of policy toward Hamas must begin with an admission that the current policy is a failure. Isolation has not compelled Hamas to accept the Quartet's conditions, has not turned the people of Gaza against the group, has not strengthened Fatah, has not reduced anti-Israeli violence, and has not contributed to any visible progress in peace diplomacy. It has, however, further embittered the Palestinian people, in both Gaza and the West Bank. Israel cannot make peace with half of the Palestinian people and be at war with the other half. The theory that peace can be achieved more easily by dividing Hamas and Fatah has been proven wrong in practice. It is also clear that Hamas has a stronger grip on Gaza than ever before, and that it has the power to thwart any forward movement in diplomacy. Regardless of the fact that Hamas does not appear to have softened its strategic objectives vis-a-vis Israel, this practical reality cannot be wished away.

In order to maximize the chances for true improvement on the ground, policymakers should seek approaches that would end rocket fire on Israel, alleviate humanitarian suffering in Gaza, and boost Abbas's political standing. Some have suggested that Israel undertake a full-scale military invasion of Gaza to wipe Hamas out and put an end to the rocket attacks. But a military approach would lack any obvious exit strategy and would not address the main political problem created by Hamas's willingness to confront Israel: namely, the weakening of Abbas's political legitimacy.

Others propose a limited ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, negotiated by a third party. Although such an agreement may help limit violence and avert a humanitarian disaster, it would do nothing for Abbas, who would instead look impotent in the shadow of Hamas's diplomatic success.

A wiser approach would be to give Abbas a central role in reaching any new arrangement with Hamas. But this requires Hamas's assent, which would come at a price. Specifically, the United States would need to drop its objection to a power-sharing agreement between Fatah and Hamas as the basis for a new accord. This accord, achieved through Egyptian mediation, would open transit between Gaza and Egypt, give Abbas supporters a certain role in border control, and give Hamas an appropriate role in Palestinian national institutions.

If they were to establish such a unity government, perhaps Hamas and Fatah could reach some understanding about joint support for the principles of the Arab peace initiative. But a more crucial test for Hamas would be behavioral. Putting aside the group's rhetoric regarding Israel -- which will not change -- the more important question is whether Hamas would live up to its part of a bargain in terms of halting rocket fire and other violence against Israel. As in most situations, deeds would speak much more loudly than words.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Albar Sheikh.*

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