

America's Hidden Role in Hamas's Rise to Power

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The United States bears much of the blame for the ongoing bloodshed in the Gaza Strip and nearby parts of Israel. Indeed, were it not for misguided Israeli and American policies, Hamas would not be in control of the territory in the first place.

Israel initially encouraged the rise of the Palestinian Islamist movement as a counter to the Palestine Liberation Organization, the secular coalition composed of Fatah and various leftist and other nationalist movements. Beginning in the early 1980s, with generous funding from the U.S.-backed family dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, the antecedents of Hamas began to emerge through the establishment of schools, health care clinics, social service organizations and other entities that stressed an ultraconservative interpretation of Islam, which up to that point had not been very common among the Palestinian population. The hope was that if people spent more time praying in mosques, they would be less prone to enlist in left-wing nationalist movements challenging the Israeli occupation.

While supporters of the secular PLO were denied their own media or right to hold political gatherings, the Israeli occupation authorities allowed radical Islamic groups to hold rallies, publish uncensored newspapers and even have their own radio station. For example, in the occupied Palestinian city of Gaza in 1981, Israeli soldiers — who had shown no hesitation in brutally suppressing peaceful pro-PLO demonstrations — stood by when a group of Islamic extremists attacked and burned a PLO-affiliated health clinic in Gaza for offering family-planning services for women.

Hamas, an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement), was founded in 1987 by Sheik Ahmed Yassin, who had been freed from prison when Israel conquered the Gaza Strip 20 years earlier. Israel's priorities in suppressing Palestinian dissent during this period were revealing: In 1988, Israel forcibly exiled Palestinian activist Mubarak Awad, a Christian pacifist who advocated the use of Gandhian-style resistance to the Israeli occupation and Israeli-Palestinian peace, while allowing Yassin to circulate anti-Jewish hate literature and publicly call for the destruction of Israel by force of arms.

American policy was not much different: Up until 1993, U.S. officials in the consular office in Jerusalem met periodically with Hamas leaders, while they were barred from meeting with anyone from the PLO, including leading moderates within the coalition. This policy continued despite the fact that the PLO had renounced terrorism and unilaterally recognized Israel as far back as 1988.

One of the early major boosts for Hamas came when the Israeli government expelled more than 400 Palestinian Muslims in late 1992. While most of the exiles were associated with Hamas-affiliated social service agencies, very few had been accused of any violent crimes. Since such expulsions are a direct contravention to international law, the U.N. Security

Council unanimously condemned the action and called for their immediate return. The incoming Clinton administration, however, blocked the United Nations from enforcing its resolution and falsely claimed that an Israeli offer to eventually allow some of exiles back constituted a fulfillment of the U.N. mandate. The result of the Israeli and American actions was that the exiles became heroes and martyrs, and the credibility of Hamas in the eyes of the Palestinians grew enormously — and so did its political strength.

Still, at the time of the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO in 1993, polls showed that Hamas had the support of only 15 percent of the Palestinian community. Support for Hamas grew, however, as promises of a viable Palestinian state faded as Israel continued to expand its colonization drive on the West Bank without apparent U.S. objections, doubling the amount of settlers over the next dozen years. The rule of Fatah leader and Palestinian Authority President Yassir Arafat and his cronies proved to be corrupt and inept, while Hamas leaders were seen to be more honest and in keeping with the needs of ordinary Palestinians. In early 2001, Israel cut off all substantive negotiations with the Palestinians, and a devastating U.S.-backed Israeli offensive the following year destroyed much of the Palestinian Authority's infrastructure, making prospects for peace and statehood even more remote. Israeli closures and blockades sank the Palestinian economy into a serious depression, and Hamas-run social services became all the more important for ordinary Palestinians.

Seeing how Fatah's 1993 decision to end the armed struggle and rely on a U.S.-led peace process had resulted in increased suffering, Hamas' popularity grew well beyond its hard-line fundamentalist base and its use of terrorism against Israel — despite being immoral, illegal and counterproductive — seemed to express the sense of anger and impotence of wide segments of the Palestinian population. Meanwhile — in a policy defended by the Bush administration and Democratic leaders in Congress — Israel's use of death squads resulted in the deaths of Yassin and scores of other Hamas leaders, turning them into martyrs in the eyes of many Palestinians and increasing Hamas' support still further.

Hamas Comes to Power

With the Bush administration insisting that the Palestinians stage free and fair elections after the death of Arafat in 2004, Fatah leaders hoped that coaxing Hamas into the electoral process would help weaken its more radical elements. Despite U.S. objections, the Palestinian parliamentary elections went ahead in January 2006 with Hamas' participation. They were monitored closely by international observers and were universally recognized as free and fair. With reformist and leftist parties divided into a half-dozen competing slates, Hamas was seen by many Palestinians disgusted with the status quo as the only viable alternative to the corrupt Fatah incumbents, and with Israel refusing to engage in substantive peace negotiations with Abbas' Fatah-led government, they figured there was little to lose in electing Hamas. In addition, factionalism within the ruling party led a number of districts to have competing Fatah candidates. As a result, even though Hamas only received 44 percent of the vote, it captured a majority of parliament and the right to select the prime minister and form a new government.

Ironically, the position of prime minister did not exist under the original constitution of the Palestinian Authority, but was added in March 2003 at the insistence of the United States, which desired a counterweight to President Arafat. As a result, while the elections allowed Abbas to remain as president, he was forced to share power with Ismail Haniya, the Hamas prime minister.

Despite claiming support for free elections, the United States tried from the outset to undermine the Hamas government. It was largely due to U.S. pressure that Abbas refused Hamas' initial invitation to form a national unity government that would include Fatah and from which some of the more hard-line Hamas leaders would have presumably been marginalized. The Bush administration pressured the Canadians, Europeans and others in the international community to impose stiff sanctions on the Palestine Authority, although a limited amount of aid continued to flow to government offices controlled by Abbas.

Once one of the more-prosperous regions in the Arab world, decades of Israeli occupation had resulted in the destruction of much of the indigenous Palestinian economy, making the Palestinian Authority dependent on foreign aid to provide basic functions for its people. The impact of these sanctions, therefore, was devastating. The Iranian regime rushed in to partially fulfill the void, providing millions of dollars to run basic services and giving the Islamic republic — which until then had not been allied with Hamas and had not been a major player in Palestinian politics — unprecedented leverage.

Meanwhile, record unemployment led angry and hungry young men to become easy recruits for Hamas militants. One leading Fatah official noted how, "For many people, this was the only way to make money." Some Palestinian police, unpaid by their bankrupt government, clandestinely joined the Hamas militia as a second job, creating a dual loyalty.

The demands imposed at the insistence of the Bush administration and Congress on the Palestinian Authority in order to lift the sanctions appeared to have been designed to be rejected and were widely interpreted as a pretext for punishing the Palestinian population for voting the wrong way. For example, the United States demanded that the Hamas-led government unilaterally recognize the right of the state of Israel to exist, even though Israel has never recognized the right of the Palestinians to have a viable state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or anywhere else. Other demands included an end of attacks on civilians in Israel while not demanding that Israel likewise end its attacks on civilian areas in the Gaza Strip. They also demanded that the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority accept all previously negotiated agreements, even as Israel continued to violate key components of the Wye River Agreement and other negotiated deals with the Palestinians.

While Hamas honored a unilateral cease-fire regarding suicide bombings in Israel, border clashes and rocket attacks into Israel continued. Israel, meanwhile, with the support of the Bush administration, engaged in devastating air strikes against crowded urban neighborhoods, resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties. Congress also went on record defending the Israeli assaults — which were widely condemned in the international community as excessive and in violation of international humanitarian law — as legitimate acts of self-defense.

A Siege, Not a Withdrawal

The myth perpetuated by both the Bush administration and congressional leaders of both parties was that Israel's 2005 dismantling of its illegal settlements in the Gaza Strip and the withdrawal of military units that supported them constituted effective freedom for the Palestinians of the territory. American political leaders from President George W. Bush to House Speaker Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., have repeatedly praised Israel for its belated compliance with a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions calling for its withdrawal of these illegal settlements (despite Israel's ongoing violations of these same resolutions by

maintaining and expanding illegal settlements in the West Bank and Golan Heights).

In reality, however, the Gaza Strip has remained effectively under siege. Even prior to the Hamas victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006, the Israeli government not only severely restricted — as is its right — entry from the Gaza Strip into Israel, but also controlled passage through the border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, as well. Israel also refused to allow the Palestinians to open their airport or seaport. This not only led to periodic shortages of basic necessities imported through Egypt, but resulted in the widespread wasting of perishable exports — such as fruits, vegetables and cut flowers — vital to the territory's economy. Furthermore, Gaza residents were cut off from family members and compatriots in the West Bank and elsewhere in what many have referred to as the world's largest open-air prison.

In retaliation, Hamas and allied militias began launching rocket attacks into civilian areas of Israel. Israel responded by bombing, shelling and periodic incursions in civilian areas in the Gaza Strip, which, by the time of the 2006 cease-fire, had killed over 200 civilians, including scores of children. Bush administration officials, echoed by congressional leaders of both parties, justifiably condemned the rocket attacks by Hamas-allied units into civilian areas of Israel (which at that time had resulted in scores of injuries but only one death), but defended Israel's far more devastating attacks against civilian targets in the Gaza Strip. This created a reaction that strengthened Hamas' support in the territory even more.

The Gaza Strip's population consists primarily of refugees from Israel's ethnic cleansing of most of Palestine almost 60 years ago and their descendents, most of whom have had no gainful employment since Israel sealed the border from most day laborers in the late 1980s. Crowded into only 140 square miles and subjected to extreme violence and poverty, it is not surprising that many would become susceptible to extremist politics, such as those of the Islamist Hamas movement. Nor is it surprising that under such conditions, people with guns would turn on each other.

Undermining the Unity Government

When factional fighting between armed Fatah and Hamas groups broke out in early 2007, Saudi officials negotiated a power-sharing agreement between the two leading Palestinian political movements. U.S. officials, however, unsuccessfully encouraged Abbas to renounce the agreement and dismiss the entire government. Indeed, ever since the election of a Hamas parliamentary majority, the Bush administration began pressuring Fatah to stage a coup and abolish parliament.

The national unity government put key ministries in the hands of Fatah members and independent technocrats and removed some of the more hard-line Hamas leaders and, while falling well short of Western demands, Hamas did indicate an unprecedented willingness to engage with Israel, accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and negotiate a long-term cease-fire with Israel. For the first time, this could have allowed Israel and the United States the opportunity to bring into peace talks a national unity government representing virtually all the factions and parties active in Palestinian politics on the basis of the Arab League peace initiative for a two-state solution and U.N. Security Council Resolution 242. However, both the Israeli and American governments refused.

Instead, the Bush administration decided to escalate the conflict by ordering Israel to ship large quantities of weapons to armed Fatah groups to enable them to fight Hamas and

stage a coup. Israeli military leaders initially resisted the idea, fearing that much of these arms would end up in the hands of Hamas, but — as Israeli journalist Uri Avnery put it — “our government obeyed American orders, as usual.” That Fatah was being supplied with weapons from Israel while Hamas was fighting the Israelis led many Palestinians — even those who don’t share Hamas’ extremist ideology — to see Fatah as collaborators and Hamas as liberation fighters. This was a major factor leading Hamas to launch what it saw as a preventive war or a countercoup by overrunning the offices of the Fatah militias in June 2007 and, just as the Israelis feared, many of these newly supplied weapons have indeed ended up in the hands of Hamas militants. Hamas has ruled the Gaza Strip ever since.

The United States also threw its support to Mohammed Dahlan, the notorious Fatah security chief in Gaza, who — despite being labeled by American officials as “moderate” and “pragmatic” — oversaw the detention, torture and execution of Hamas activists and others, leading to widespread popular outrage against Fatah and its supporters.

Alvaro de Soto, former U.N. special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, stated in his confidential final report leaked to the press a few weeks before the Hamas takeover that “the Americans clearly encouraged a confrontation between Fatah and Hamas” and “worked to isolate and damage Hamas and build up Fatah with recognition and weaponry.” De Soto also recalled how in the midst of Egyptian efforts to arrange a cease-fire following a flare-up in factional fighting earlier this year, a U.S. official told him that “I like this violence ... it means that other Palestinians are resisting Hamas.”

Weakening Palestinian Moderates

For moderate forces to overcome extremist forces, the moderates must be able to provide their population with what they most need: in this case, the end of Israel’s siege of the Gaza Strip and its occupation and colonizing of the remaining Palestinian territories. However, Israeli policies — backed by the Bush administration and Congress — seem calculated to make this impossible. The noted Israeli policy analyst Gershon Baskin observed, in an article in the Jerusalem Post just prior to Hamas’ electoral victory, 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.”

Bush and an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Congress have also thrown their support to the Israeli government’s unilateral disengagement policy that, 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 swaths of Palestinian territory. In addition, neither Congress nor the Bush administration has pushed the Israelis to engage in serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians, which have been suspended for over six years, despite calls by Abbas and the international community that they resume. Given that Fatah’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 has hurt the nationalist cause.

Following Hamas’ armed takeover of Gaza, the highly respected Israeli journalist Roni Shaked, writing in the June 15 issue of Yediot Ahronoth, noted that “The U.S. and Israel had

a decisive contribution to this failure.” Despite claims by Israel and the United States that they wanted to strengthen Abbas, “in practice, zero was done for this to happen. The meetings with him turned into an Israeli political tool, and Olmert’s kisses and backslapping turned Abbas into a collaborator and a source of jokes on the Palestinian street.”

De Soto’s report to the U.N. Secretary-General, in which he referred to Hamas’ stance toward Israel as “abominable,” also noted that “Israeli policies seemed perversely designed to encourage the continued action by Palestinian militants.” Regarding the U.S.-instigated international sanctions against the Palestinian Authority, the former Peruvian diplomat also observed that “the steps taken by the international community with the presumed purpose of bringing about a Palestinian entity that will live in peace with its neighbor Israel have had precisely the opposite effect.”

Some Israeli commentators saw this strategy as deliberate. Avnery noted, “Our government has worked for year to destroy Fatah, in order to avoid the need to negotiate an agreement that would inevitably lead to the withdrawal from the occupied territories and the settlements there.” Similarly, M.J. Rosenberg of the Israel Policy Center observed, “the fact is that Israeli (and American) right-wingers are rooting for the Palestinian extremists” since “supplanting ... Fatah with Islamic fundamentalists would prevent a situation under which Israel would be forced to negotiate with moderates.” The problem, Avnery wrote at that time, is that “now, when it seems that this aim has been achieved, they have no idea what to do about the Hamas victory.”

Since then, the Israeli strategy has been to increase the blockade on the Gaza Strip, regardless of the disastrous humanitarian consequences, and more recently to launch devastating attacks that have killed hundreds of people, as many as one-quarter of whom have been civilians. The Bush administration and leaders of both parties in Congress have defended Israeli policies on the grounds that the extremist Hamas governs the territory.

Yet no one seems willing to acknowledge the role the United States had in making it possible for Hamas to come to power in Gaza in the first place.

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