

# Hamas versus Fatah: Impasse in the Peace Talks. Why Washington Says ‘No’: Hamas is Not Ready to be ‘Engaged’

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One key difference between Hamas and its rival, the Fatah movement in the West Bank, is that Hamas is accountable to a much more complex set of priorities and expectations. While Fatah is effortlessly co-opted, Hamas remains confined by ideological standards and the stringiest political space. Although, on one hand this represents Hamas’ greatest strength, on the other it shows just how truly arduous is its political undertaking.

The difference is relevant in light of the resumption of talks between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington, followed by another round of talks in the Middle East. Both once more raised the question: can Israel and Fatah achieve peace without Hamas’ involvement?

The question itself can be interpreted in more ways than one. Dan Murphy, writing in the Christian Science Monitor on September 16, asked: Can ignoring Hamas lead to Israeli-Palestinian peace? Murphy, unlike many in the US media, had enough insight to see the issue as worthy of discussion. His use of the word ‘ignoring’, however, is greatly misguided.

“But there’s a crucial missing element that will undoubtedly trouble the Israeli-Palestinian talks as they move ahead. Gaza, the Palestinian enclave ruled by the Islamist Hamas movement, is not at the table,” Murphy wrote. With that he offered his version of what not ‘ignoring’ Hamas requires. Far from ‘engaging’ the party, it simply means placing Gaza, that lonely enclave ruled by Islamic Hamas, on the table.

Gaza, however, is not merely one issue among many. It represents the heart of the matter. The Gaza Strip was placed under siege due to the Hamas’ victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections, which robbed Abbas and his movement from any legitimacy in holding negotiations with Israel. The suffocating siege on that resilient and overcrowded strip was Israel’s attempt at quashing what could have been a promising democratic experience, with the potential to inspire many more democratic revolutions in the Middle East. Israel’s action was supported by the US and much of Europe, as well as some Arab countries.

Yet, considering the layers of meaning that Gaza and Hamas represent in any future settlement in the Middle East, it seems utterly bizarre that US President Obama’s Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, answered with a simple “no” when he was recently asked whether Washington will reach out to Hamas.

“No” seems both too simple and too harsh, considering the gravity of the situation. Even if

the US administration wishes to write off Palestinian democracy altogether, one would think that a sensible foreign policy would at least wrangle with the Hamas dilemma. The Obama administration cannot be serious about a lasting peace while continuing to play the same nonsensical good guys/bad guys, carrot and stick political games that were also employed by Bush.

On the other hand, the resumption of talks between Fatah's Abbas and Israel is a blessing in disguise for Hamas. Very few in the Middle East, and even fewer Palestinians will see in Abbas a legitimate and representative leader. If anything, Abbas' constant appearance with the very Israeli leader who is robbing Palestine's land and subjugating and exacting racist laws against its population will further diminish his discredited profile. Naturally, Abbas' political loss is Hamas' gain.

In fact, it was this very 'peace process' that destroyed late Palestinian leader Yasser's Arafat's political resume. It tarnished his reputation and split his party. Arafat is remembered fondly because of his last stance and death under Israeli siege in Ramallah. His political failure through the years, however, gave Hamas its real birth as a mainstream political movement. Abbas is simply boosting Hamas' already high political stocks. His future failures will deposit even more credit into Hamas' account.

But that too represents a serious challenge to Hamas. Politically isolated abroad, physically besieged and constantly derided by the media, Hamas can hardly use its rising political profile among Palestinians, or translate its gains into any tangible returns in or outside Palestine. Abbas knows this fully, which explains his interest in Israel maintaining its siege on Hamas and Gaza. Netanyahu understands this as well, which explains his government's insistence on holding still, despite the PR disaster that Gaza has earned his country. The US also fully agrees, thus Mitchell's callous, yet telling "no" regarding a possible engagement with Hamas.

Abbas, despite his authority's lack of legitimacy and shrinking popularity among Palestinians, remains the best option of a 'Palestinian leadership' as far as the US is concerned. He is flexible, both morally and politically. His Authority's bread and butter are US funds and US-Western political validation. Abbas gleaned from the Gaza experience that popular democracy is worthless in the age of draconian sieges and Blitzkriegs. In fact he used both the siege and the Israel war on Gaza to strengthen his political stance and to bargain with the US. But his language and action will remain predictable.

While 'engaging' Hamas, however that is interpreted, is the only right option if the US is truly interested in locating a legitimate Palestinian leadership, Hamas is likely to prove a much tougher bargainer. Not only is Hamas ideologically grounded - based on firm nationalistic and religious dictates - but its target audience is not just a few heads of states. Hamas' audience is Palestinians at home and abroad, Arab and Muslim populations and to lesser degree civil societies elsewhere. This is a complex demographic, which requires an articulate political thinking and language, which Hamas is not yet able to offer.

Fatah under Arafat was held accountable largely to Arab governments, and later to the US and Western donors. At the same time, it valiantly resented Israeli pressures. Under Abbas, Fatah is held accountable to all the above with little resentment. While Hamas factors all of these players into its political calculation, it is also liable to its commitment to its Palestinian constituency as incorruptible, uncompromising and committed to resistance.

In order for Hamas to become politically manageable, from the US point of view, it would have to depart from these commitments, and become as politically flexible, predictable and controllable as Fatah and Abbas. The US can only work with a weak Palestinian leadership which it can easily manipulate. Hamas, thus far, doesn't fit the criterion, thus the lack of any prospect of 'engagement', and the continued betting on Abbas and Netanyahu, despite the predictable - and possibly disastrous - outcome of their talks.

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