

Should the European Union talk to Hamas?

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by Dr. Mark Heller*

If the recently-concluded *tahdia* (“calm”) between Israel and Hamas breaks down, some advocates of European Union activism will undoubtedly call for discussions with Hamas in order to restore the truce; if it holds, the same sources may propose direct EU engagement with Hamas in order to facilitate movement toward a political resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Either way, the “calm” is likely to encourage those who were insisting even before it was agreed that international engagement with Hamas is necessary to break the apparent logjam on the Israeli-Palestinian track (and even argued that a ceasefire was impossible without such dialogue). That position was misguided before and it remains misguided now. Some kind of political engagement with Hamas by the main protagonists – Israel and the Palestinian Authority -- may well be indicated at some point in the future, but the decision on the timing and conditions for such a dialogue (as well as the identity of any possible mediators or facilitators) should be left to the parties directly involved; any uncoordinated intervention by others, however well intentioned, would be not only unhelpful but counterproductive.

Following the victory of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections but before Hamas formed a government in March, the international Quartet (the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and the Russian Federation) stipulated that “all members of a future Palestinian government must be committed to nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Roadmap.” Hamas’ consistent refusal to meet those conditions resulted in the refusal of all Quartet members to deal formally with it. However, since Hamas forcibly took over the Gaza Strip in July 2007, there has been a rising chorus of voices calling on Europe to talk with Hamas. In fact, the French Foreign Ministry even established “unofficial” contacts when it dispatched a retired senior diplomat to Gaza to impress on Hamas leaders what was necessary for official relations to begin. Thus far, the European Union *per se* has refrained from breaking ranks with the rest of the Quartet, but given the faith in the power of “engagement” that is so widespread in European discourse, it cannot be assumed that this will continue to be the case. Still, any recommendation to shift policy ought to address four essential questions:

With whom are you dealing?

What do you want?

What can you realistically expect to get?

What is the anticipated cost, not just in return for any concessions that might or might not be forthcoming but also for the very act of changing course and agreeing to engage?

1. Nature of the Adversary

Hamas – the Islamic Resistance Movement – is an outgrowth of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brethren. It was formed at the beginning of 1988 (shortly after the outbreak of the first *intifada*) in response to the taunts of Fatah activists that the Brethren had contented themselves with *da’wa* (religious preaching) and contributed nothing to the violent confrontation with Israel. The founding covenant of Hamas declared that the movement’s objectives are the liberation of all Palestine (i.e., the destruction of Israel), the implementation of shari’a (Islamic law) throughout liberated territory, and the elimination of all corrupting foreign influence and presence. The struggle to achieve these goals was defined as jihad and it was to encompass all means, including violence. Hamas has since engaged in a variety of social, economic and welfare activities, but its main focus – indeed, its “trademark” -- has been the deliberate application of violence to Israeli non-combatants in order to advance its political agenda, which is precisely why it has been designated a terrorist organization by Israel and the United States but also by the European Union.

2. Purpose of Engagement

Defecting from the policy of the Quartet would certainly assert the EU’s independence as a foreign policy actor, which is sometimes seen as an end in itself. Apart from that, however, the only putative purposes for engaging with Hamas would

be to persuade it either to abandon its stated goals or to abandon or at least suspend the use of its violent methods.

3. Prospects of Success

For Hamas, abandoning its stated goals would mean a fundamental transformation in its very essence. In pointing to the experience of European enlargement (or the peace process in Ireland), many have argued that some engagement and the prospect of more have the power to transform others. Although that may sometimes happen where the incentive is high enough and some propensity to transform already exists, that is decidedly not the case with Hamas. It would be wrong to assert that Hamas can never fundamentally change under any circumstances whatsoever, but there is virtually no chance of that happening within any reasonable time frame as a result of engagement by Europe. For one thing, no one is even considering the possibility of offering the incentive of EU membership that presumably most motivated European candidate-states. For another, that incentive operated, in the case of European expansion, not to initiate transformation, but rather to accelerate and consolidate changes (democratization, market economies) that had already been undertaken (and that helped, in the case of the Irish peace process, to deplete the political-cultural hinterland of the IRA in the Republic of Ireland). Nothing remotely analogous has happened in Gaza.

On the other hand, as this latest truce and its predecessors show, it is possible to persuade Hamas to suspend reliance on its predominant method of operation. However, even that depends on Hamas being convinced that the alternative is worse, i.e., that refusal to do so endangers its power and even existence as a viable political movement. In other words, it depends not on positive incentives but rather on the fear that negative incentives will continue if it refuses to comply and the promise that they will be eased if it does comply. That has been the logical result of the Quartet's isolation of Hamas and especially Israel's economic and military counter-measures and threats of further escalation. Contrary to unsubstantiated claims that such measures have only strengthened Hamas, they have actually weakened it by highlighting its inability to prevent deterioration in the security and quality of life of the people for whom it is ostensibly responsible. According to polling carried out in early June by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, current conditions are considered very good or good by 25% of West Bank respondents but only 5% of Gaza respondents. Moreover, the current Fatah leader and President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, is preferred to (Gaza) Prime Minister Ismail Hanieh of Hamas by a margin of 52-40; Fatah is favored over Hamas by 43-31; the Palestinian Authority is judged more able than Hamas to get peace with Israel by a margin of 49-15; and 41% of respondents even think that the PA is better able to force concessions from Israel (as opposed to 25% who think that about Hamas). In all cases, assessments of Hamas have gotten worse since the last survey in early March and, most significantly of all, the breakdown of assessments by region actually shows that disapproval rates of Hamas in Gaza are almost double those in the West Bank.

The threat to its political base is the major reason for Hamas' current willingness to exercise restraint in its use of violence, notwithstanding its principled commitment to uncompromising "resistance," and restraint is unlikely to persist unless that threat continues to remain active. Of course, more is needed for there to be any chance of using the status quo to activate a new political dynamic. But if that dynamic can be served by any sort of engagement, it should be the engagement of Hamas with the Palestinian Authority and Israel, in a manner to be determined by them.

4. Costs of European Engagement with Hamas

Any unconditional engagement with Hamas by the EU (or other non-regional actors), even if driven by the hope that the mere act of engagement will stimulate positive change, is likely to have the opposite effect. Rather than encouraging further moderation, it will constitute a free grant of international legitimacy that will almost certainly reinforce the belief that recalcitrance inevitably forces the other side to back down. Moreover, that message will resonate beyond the Palestinian arena and demoralize other non-Islamist governments and publics in the Middle East by signaling that the world – or at least Europe – acknowledges that non-state Islamist movements are the wave of the future -- an increasingly powerful reality that needs to be accommodated rather than confronted and checked.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the seductive power of the idea of engagement, a unilateral EU decision to talk with Hamas is likely to produce little in terms of transforming the movement and could well have negative consequences both in the Palestinian arena and elsewhere in the region. Europe would be better advised to remain committed to the Quartet position and to coordinate any change in Quartet policy vis-à-vis Hamas with those who are Hamas' main adversaries and targets – the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

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