

Editor's Notes: In the shadow of Hamas

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Twelve days to go, and the elections are looking increasingly like a referendum on the virtues of a second disengagement, among an electorate depressed by the ascent of Hamas and hardly overwhelmed by the Israeli leadership and policy options.

Labor holds out faint hopes of the possibility of negotiation via the office of Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas but, facing a Hamas-dominated Palestinian government, the principal choice for many Israeli voters appears to be between Kadima's now overt commitment to a second pullback in the West Bank, and the determination by the Likud and the National Union-NRP alliance to stay put.

If Camp David created an Israeli consensus that the Palestinian leadership was not seeking peace, the Hamas victory has dramatically widened the circle of Israelis who have concluded that the Palestinian public does not seek coexistence either. In such a climate, for all Labor's distinctive social welfare policies, its appeal is much circumscribed.

Given the high proportion of still-undecided voters, and the proclivity of Israeli opinion polls to underestimate the Right, the result may yet be closer than the surveys predict, although the windfall for Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Tuesday's enforced capture of the killers of Rehavam Ze'evi in Jericho may solidify Kadima's support.

The notion that Jericho was timed, Osirak-style, to help boost Olmert, though advanced by various critics at home and abroad, is patently ridiculous. That a partnership of Ariel Sharon and George W. Bush might have dreamed up a timetable whereby the international monitors at the jail would be pulled out on election eve stretches credibility. The idea of an Olmert-Bush-Tony Blair triumvirate coordinating in such a fashion is unthinkable. Not to mention that it was Hamas that set the pace with talk of freeing the murderers, assisted by Abbas's stated intention to do nothing to prevent their departure. Israel was merely reacting to those events, and the Olmert-directed response, as Netanyahu readily acknowledged, was precisely what any responsible Israeli government would have ordered.

As impatient politicians and analysts speculate on the nature of the coalition government ahead of us, it seems reasonable to believe that an overwhelming Kadima victory will set the stage for a second pullout - a genuine pullback, settlers *and* army, rather than the "civilians only" hybrid floated this week, whose main purpose seems devoted to maintaining unity within Kadima's own ranks. Such a withdrawal would doubtless be bitterly resisted by the settlers and their supporters, but such opposition would be deflated if it were unequivocally clear that such is the will of most Israeli voters. A narrower Kadima victory, however, would make any planned pullback far more complex politically, and more divisive in practice, since opponents - in the Knesset and on the ground - would contend that the government lacked the necessary consensual mandate.

As a gloomy Israel prepares to vote, and its government to grapple with the implications of Hamas taking formal office, the would-be enlightened international community is also still utterly at a loss as to how to come to terms with the dire new reality.

Various private conversations I've had in the last few days have confirmed that the Americans, making a virtue of paralysis, are resolved to "wait and see" what exactly a Hamas government is going to exemplify before taking a precise position.

They won't want to fund it, or even interact with its more unpalatable personalities, but neither do they want the West Bank and Gaza turning into humanitarian disaster areas. The overwhelming majority of US funding has long been channeled to the Palestinians via non-PA frameworks, but the process is hard to monitor, protracted, costly and ineffectual. If they could find

more efficient channels, and constructive social and educational projects, they'd want to keep a flow of funds. But that's a big if.

Formally, the US remains opposed to further Israeli unilateralism and, however irrelevantly, formally committed to the road map negotiated path to peace. But even those who still harbored faint hopes for eventual diplomatic progress have been thoroughly sobered by the Hamas landslide. And the notion of salvaging even a veneer of interaction via the offices of Abbas, not a particularly realistic prospect in any case, gained little luster from the PA chairman's self-serving condemnation of Israel for intervening to ensure the continued incarceration of the "Jericho six."

European Union representatives, meanwhile, are dutifully communicating the consensual message to Hamas that it must recognize Israel, commit to signed agreements with Israel and renounce terrorism. The only problem is the "or else" aspect of that admirable demand. When Hamas leaders ask "or else what?" the Europeans threaten that failure to comply will trigger a far-reaching review of EU policy. Terrifying.

In fact, however, the EU may be alighting on a path to continued interaction with Hamas while formally sticking to the "we won't deal with the terrorists" line. At the end of this month, the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) will hold its annual gathering of European and Mediterranean parliamentarians in Brussels. Recent years have seen the unremarkable participation of Knesset members and representative delegates from the PLC. But who will come this year, when the PLC is newly dominated by the untouchables of Hamas?

According to one extremely senior European source, invitations went out as usual to the PLC members, including those on the newly elected Hamas-affiliated Change and Reform List. This source said that, of course the EMPA grandees knew full well that this was the Hamas list, but it didn't actually say Hamas on the ballot, did it? And so, the reasoning went, those elected delegates from the Party for Reform and Change who are self-proclaimed Hamas members must remain off limits. But some of the rest, those who don't walk around loudly declaring their allegiance to the terror group, will be welcomed to Brussels on March 26.

According to an EMPA spokeswoman, however, the EMPA doesn't issue invitations at all. It is up to the member parliaments, including the PLC, to select their delegations. And among the five PLC members slated to attend the annual gathering, at least one, Mahmoud Ahmad al-Ramahi, is a member of the Reform and Change List.

"We're hoping none of them is a true member of Hamas," said a source close to the EMPA. "If they are, since Hamas is on the EU terror list, I don't know what we'll do. There'll be a big sigh of relief if they're not."

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