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Power poses problem for Hamas

By GAL LUFT

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WASHINGTON -- ...

In Arabic, the word Hamas means "zeal" or "fervor." In Hebrew, the word means "destruction" and "violence."

This semantic discrepancy reflects how differently Palestinians and Israelis feel toward the militant Islamic group Hamas, which has killed hundreds of Israelis in shootings and suicide bombings since its founding in 1987 and which is now in the driver's seat of Palestinian politics.

To many Palestinians, the appeal of Hamas comes not only from the pious, "uncorrupted" way of life it promotes or the charitable work it performs, but also from its hard-nosed approach toward both Israel and the unpopular leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its ability to infuse zeal and vehemence into the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

The organization's unwillingness to accept the existence of Israel as an accomplished fact and its insistence on a "just solution to the Palestinian problem" - a euphemism for the destruction of Israel and the return of all refugees to their homes - still resonate with the masses.

Hamas says what others can't or don't want to utter for political reasons: that President Bush's solution of two states, Israel and Palestine, existing together in peace essentially means giving up a so-called moral and religious obligation to undo the history of the past 58 years.

Its charter says: "There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by jihad. The initiatives, proposals and international conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility."

No wonder Hamas has been the perpetual spoiler of any attempt by Israelis and Palestinians to make progress toward peace. Such was the case during the heyday of the Oslo process

from 1994 through 1996 when Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres were at the helm. Hamas' suicide bombers blew up buses in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, inflicting hundreds of casualties and subsequently bringing disillusioned Israelis to elect a right-wing government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. Time and again, Hamas derailed every initiative to end the violence, claiming responsibility for scores of suicide attacks as well as numerous Qassam rocket attacks on Israeli communities.

Last week's political revolution in the Palestinian-controlled territories is a profound disappointment to those who hoped to reach a negotiated solution to the Palestinian problem. But there is a silver lining emerging from Hamas' rise to power.

Hamas' victory will force the movement to do something it has so far declined to do: take active part in a Palestinian nation-building process, and assume responsibility for the future of the Palestinian population and improve its quality of life.

Fiery Hamas leaders such as Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Zahar have been instrumental in sowing strife and discontent among Palestinians as they point to the many flaws and failures of the PA, its corruption and obsequiousness toward Israel and the United States. They will now be judged by their ability to present a comprehensive agenda to improve Palestinian humanitarian conditions and articulate a viable strategy to end the conflict.

Those who until recently broke the law are now in charge of maintaining it. Those who opposed guns collection are now in charge of garbage collection.

Once in power, Hamas will be expected to present a style of governance different from the failed style of the PA and address socioeconomic issues that transcend the Arab-Israeli conflict. And this is exactly where Hamas is likely to stumble. The cases of Afghanistan and Iran have shown that the best way to fail a fundamentalist movement is through empowerment.

Like Hamas, the Taliban grew in popularity because it fought corruption and lawlessness. The Afghans saw the Taliban regime as a desired alternative to the chaotic and brutal nature of its predecessor. But they were quickly disillusioned once they found themselves under the rule of an austere and puritanical regime that failed to live up its promises. As a result, most Afghans didn't shed tears over the Taliban's demise after the United States went to war against it.

In the case of Iran, the process is taking longer, but its logic is similar. Clearly, the growing discontent with the regime among many young Iranians has grown from the realization that the revolution has failed to deliver.

The same is true for the Palestinians. According to a recent PA poll, nearly 70 percent of Palestinians would prefer Sharia, or Islamic law, to secular government; living under Sharia may wean them of that illusion.

The only way to break the spell of Hamas is not by crushing it but rather by putting it to the test and awaiting its likely failure. Like many other religious revolutionary movements, Hamas promises much and delivers little. All that is needed is to provide it with an opportunity to destroy itself - even if such a route takes time and is fraught with danger.

Before the Palestinians can liberate themselves from Israel, they must free themselves from the illusions and messianic ideas propagated by Hamas.

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