

# Israeli Exceptionalism: Hamas Is Not the Issue

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Recently, the Aljazeera online English service posed a seemingly simple question: “Should (Israeli Prime Minister Ehud) Olmert talk with Hamas?”

The question, of course, acquires ample meaning once examined against the backdrop of far-reaching political developments: Stalled peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians, the emerging political crisis between supporters of PA President Mahmoud Abbas in the Fatah movement and those of the elected Palestinian government, led by Hamas. It also comes on the heels of Olmert’s “successful” visit to Washington, where he received abundant rounds of applause from the ever-loyal US Congress and a few hints from President Bush that he can set in motion his “bold” unilateral plan to define Israel’s borders.

In fact, the debacle, that of whether the narrowly elected Olmert government should bestow the honor of engaging the convincingly elected Palestinian government, is resounding throughout the international media. However, a division in perspectives is most noticeable: One view argues that Israel shouldn’t talk to terrorists and should carry on with its convergence plan (read outright theft of Palestinian land in the West Bank and Jerusalem) unhindered.

Another urges conditional dialogue, asserting that Israel should talk to Hamas if the latter agrees to a series of conditions, such as renouncing violence, recognizing Israel, etc. No such conditions are, of course, demanded or expected of Israel, as if Israeli violence against unarmed Palestinians, much bloodier and more frequent, is a God-given right. The notion of Israel being required to recognize a Palestinian state is laughable at best.

A third view contends that President Abbas, especially in his leading capacity at the helm of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) is the only legitimate peace partner, with whom Israel should acknowledge and unconditionally discuss peace prospects.

Some say, “ask the wrong questions, get the wrong answers”. The question, repeatedly asked or answered throughout the media, unwittingly or otherwise, makes a fallacious assumption that Olmert intends to achieve peace through dialogue. The contentious issue is whether or not he should recognize Hamas as a partner in such a process. In short, Hamas is the issue, not at all the fact that the Israeli government is neither interested in peace, nor in dialogue, regardless of whether the potential Palestinian partner is bearded or otherwise.

A bit of deconstruction here is crucial; a decade and a half ago, a group of Palestinians, all secularists, most of whom were American educated, flocked to Madrid to hold unconditional dialogue, along with several Arab delegations, with their Israeli counterparts. The Palestinian frame of reference was neither religious text, nor fantastic political illusions (like those held by most mainstream Israeli politicians.) Instead, they wielded specific UN resolutions and an

American promise of a new world order that would end lingering conflicts and deliver peace and prosperity to the Middle East.

If Israel was indeed interested in a peaceful resolution to the conflict, it should've taken advantage of what seemed like a golden opportunity. Not only did the Palestinian delegation to Madrid reflect a rational, peaceful representation of Palestinian society, it was also widely respected by most Palestinians. Whether in the Occupied Territories or in Diaspora, most Palestinians felt for the first time, a glimpse of hope that perhaps an end to their burden and torment was in sight. Alas, it was not.

Israel loathes conditions, deadlines, references to international law. It constantly fought to win special status in its dealings with the Palestinians. The Madrid talks were one of the earliest challenges that confronted that Israeli exceptionalism, to the point that Israel originally demanded that Palestinians not be included in the talks as a partner, then protested the constant and arduous references to international law, finally sinking to the point of demanding that a Palestinian delegate take off his "offensive" traditional scarf (Kuffieya).

According to the Israeli definition of a suitable environment for peace, Palestinians seemed to have already crossed their boundaries, thus an alternative method of dialogue was needed: a secret one in a secluded Oslo orchard. When a "peace" deal was struck there in 1993, Palestinians were also struck; the double-dealing with their leadership was at another low point.

Fifteen years later, Palestinians have nothing to show for their patience, accommodations and compromise, more, their plight has worsened ten-fold. The small areas on which they once hoped to establish a state are now chopped up into many small plots, inundated with more and more illegal Jewish settlements and carved up yet further with uncountable Jewish-only bypass roads. They live on the brink of starvation; they lack access to medical facilities; their dream of independence has been relegated to mere quest for survival; their expectations have dwindled as Israeli borders have expanded.

The Palestinian tragedy has been unfolding and will continue to augment with or without Hamas. The advent of the latter on top of the political scene in Palestine is, at best, a reflection of Palestinians' sense of betrayal and frustration with the traditional Fatah/PLO leadership or, at worse, another opportunity that will help Israel win time, create distractions regarding the real problem and further stall a potential of peace through dialogue. If it was not Hamas, it would have been something or someone else deemed to torpedo any peace efforts: "Arafat needs to condemn terrorism in English and Arabic; Palestinian school curricula still shows a map of historic Palestine; a tunnel to smuggle weapons was uncovered in Gaza", and so forth.

While Israel carries on unhindered with its bloody campaign of "targeted assassinations," unwarranted home demolitions, land theft, etc, Palestinians are reviled for the slightest incidents. Thus, the symptoms of the conflict become the core themselves, occupying the media and any public debate dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Now, the symptom that has metamorphosed into the root of the crisis is the existence of Hamas. The conflict can only be understood within such a context.

But if true, then, will the "removal" of Hamas persuade Israel to honor international law and

all UN resolutions, including the International Court of Justice's more recent ruling on the illegitimacy of the Separation Wall, the illegal settlements, the unlawful annexation of Jerusalem, and all the rest? It is laughable to even consider such likelihood, for we all know that Hamas was never the issue in the first place.

"Should Olmert talk with Hamas?" asks Aljazeera's poll question. Need I say any more?

*Ramzy Baroud's most recent book: The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronology of a People's Struggle (Pluto Press, London) is now available at Amazon.com and other*

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