



## **The World Today**

### **The Hamas Factor in the Middle East Peace**

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It would seem that the rise of Hamas to power has made peace between the Israelis and Palestinians more elusive. In view of the public statements issued by the Israelis and Western leaders in general, this is not an unreasonable position to hold but when the issue is placed in its proper historical context the situation appears to be less bleak.

When the armed conflict between the Arabs and Israelis erupted in 1948 as a result of the creation of the state of Israel every Arab State was implacably opposed to Israel and, indeed committed itself to its annihilation. The problem was further exacerbated in 1967 when the war waged in that year resulted in the occupation of large tracts of Arab territories by Israel. It is a fair comment that there has been improvement regarding the attainment of peace –albeit partial – because under the Camp David Accord, Egypt which was formerly the main protagonist of war, reached its own peace settlement with Israel. Of course, this required the mediation of the United States.

It should be stressed that in spite of the guarded optimism expressed earlier, the situation in the Middle East remains highly volatile. Prior to his death, Yasser Arafat was demonised and portrayed as an obstacle to peace. Currently, Hamas is branded a terrorist organisation, by some, and in the eyes of the Israelis, may well be the devil incarnate. For their part, Hamas views the Israelis as evil personified, vigorously pursuing an expansionist policy.

It is obvious that each side has a very negative perception of the other and for this reason seeks to attach stringent pre-conditions for the commencement of peace talks. Hamas is expected to renounce violence and to recognise Israel, but Hamas contends that it is unable to meet these conditions while its country is under occupation. The question may now be asked whether Israel should commit itself to pre-1967 borders before peace talks are held.

It should be possible to defend Israel's right to exist without using the issue as a pre-condition for peace talks. It is a trite statement that Israel's existence does not rest on what Hamas says, or does not say. Israel has fought many wars to maintain that existence and in any future war it is highly unlikely that it would be wiped off the face of the map. Similarly, it is not likely that Israel would weaken the resolve of Hamas and the Palestinian people as a whole, by military raids and so called pre-emptive strikes. In the

final analysis, the two sides must come to the negotiating table with a view to agreeing on a just and lasting peace.

Refusal to speak to Hamas is tantamount to disregarding the will of the Palestinian people because they have elected Hamas to office. Understandably, both the Israelis and the Americans would have preferred to deal with a party which they consider to be moderate. However, one should enter a caveat here Hamas may be more successful than any moderate group in selling a peace settlement to an increasingly radicalised Palestinian population. This line of argument is equally applicable to the Israelis. It is believed that the furore which accompanied the dismantling of the Jewish settlements under the watch of Ariel Sharon would have been much greater if the order had been issued by a moderate Israeli Labour leader.

No reasonable person could have expected Hamas to be warmly embraced by the Israelis and the Americans, but it is prudent that they should be involved in the peace process. Any peace settlement, which excludes them would be without legitimacy and for this reason unsustainable. At this critical juncture in Middle Eastern politics, it is far more important to consider what Hamas does, and not what it says.

Even before the Palestinian elections, Hamas was observing a de facto cease-fire and it continues to do so. More importantly, its participation in the elections must be seen as cogent evidence that it is beginning to commit itself to a resolution of the conflict by political means, and not by force of arms.

Every Israeli leader likes to be seen as being tougher than the other – and not without good reason. Israel is surrounded by neighbours who at best are lukewarm to her existence and at worst, hostile to it. In such a scenario, it can ill-afford not to be tough. However, it is one thing to be tough, and another to be blinkered. Any Israeli leader should be sufficiently astute to appreciate that he would be undermining the faction within Hamas which has opted for the political process, and unwittingly supporting the element which sees armed struggle to the exclusion of all other means.

Israeli's military prowess is legendary and its intelligence service is arguably the best in the world. This explains why it is able to target Palestinian leaders on the West Bank or Gaza Strip and carry out military strikes from land, sea or air. However, it would be unwise to ignore these famous words of the English historian H.A.L. Fisher:

There is a nemesis which attends the doctrine of political assassination.  
The victim may fall but the cause survives strengthened by the martyr's blood.

The utterances coming from the Israelis may be an initial reaction. One should expect diplomatic posturing from both sides but they should recognise that the consequences of intransigence may be too ghastly to contemplate.