

George W. Bush, Israel, Hamas, and Democracy's Dead-End

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AG - Patrick Seale - The most breathtaking example of Western duplicity has been the call on Hamas to embrace the peace process as embodied in the Oslo accords and the Quartet's Road Map -- as if these instruments had, in any way, advanced the cause of peace. To cite a single example, Italy's right-wing prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, one of Israel's most fervent European supporters, called the Hamas victory a "very,very, very bad result." It would, he declared, set back the cause of peace for the foreseeable future. This is a dangerously mistaken analysis.

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Can Israel Make a Deal With Hamas?

Patrick Seale

Agence Global

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Patrick Seale suggests that Oslo and the Road Map are are dead due to weak support by the West. The last resort for reviving diplomatic hope for a Israeli-Palestinian agreement appears to be development of Israeli-Hamas dialogue.

The stunning victory of Hamas at the Palestinian elections of 25 January has provided Western leaders with yet another occasion for a display of hypocrisy and double standards. Several European leaders joined U.S. President George W Bush in calling on the Islamic resistance movement to renounce violence and recognise Israel, while addressing not a word of reproof to Israel about its policy of assassinating Palestinian militants, stealing Palestinian land, demolishing Palestinian homes, and stifling the Palestinian economy by innumerable closures and checkpoints.

The terrorism of Hamas is denounced while the state terrorism of Israel is tolerated and even supported.

Predictably, friends of Israel in the U.S. Congress have already drafted harsh legislative

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proposals that would ban all U.S. financial aid to a Hamas-dominated Palestinian Authority, impose a travel ban on its representatives, and close PLO offices in Washington.

It is precisely such Western double-standards that have swung the Palestinian electorate massively behind Hamas and that have fuelled the upsurge of anti-American militancy and violence which has become such a striking feature of the international political landscape.

The only dissenting voice has come from Moscow. Last Tuesday, on the same day as U.S. President George W Bush in his State of the Union address lectured Hamas to disarm, President Vladimir Putin told a press conference: "Our position on Hamas is different from that of the United States and Western Europe. The Russian Foreign Ministry has never regarded Hamas as a terrorist organization."

The most breathtaking example of Western duplicity has been the call on Hamas to embrace the peace process as embodied in the Oslo accords and the Quartet's Road Map -- as if these instruments had, in any way, advanced the cause of peace. To cite a single example, Italy's right-wing prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, one of Israel's most fervent European supporters, called the Hamas victory a "very,very, very bad result." It would, he declared, set back the cause of peace for the foreseeable future. This is a dangerously mistaken analysis.

The truth is that, although ritually invoked, both Oslo and the Road Map are already stone dead because the West put no muscle behind them, but allowed Israel to exploit them as a cover for expansion. A fresh start on a different basis needs urgently to be made, and the Hamas victory provides just such an opportunity.

Oslo and the Road Map were not killed by the Palestinians but by the adamant refusal of Ariel Sharon, when still Israeli prime minister before his stroke, to negotiate with the Palestinians, by his 'no partner' policy, by his belief that the intifada could be defeated by murdering its leaders, and above all by his determination to impose Israel's frontiers unilaterally, deep inside the West Bank, by means of the separation wall and the proliferating settlement blocks and security zones.

The real obstacle to peace is not Palestinian resistance, even when it takes the form of suicide bombings, but Israel's relentless occupation dedicated (in the words of Geoffrey Aronson, a

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close observer of Israeli policies in the occupied territories) "to the large-scale theft of land for civilian settlement."

The "occupation -- brutal, arbitrary and opaque -- with settlement at its heart, continues to define relations between Israel and Palestinians today," Aronson writes in his latest report on Israeli Settlement, published by the Washington-based Foundation for Middle East Peace.

The Hamas victory must be seen as a response to Israeli colonialism, just as the insurgency in Iraq is a response to American colonialism. In both cases, the issue is foreign occupation of Arab territory. Once the occupation is ended, peace can prevail.

The American failure over the past fifteen years to demand and insist that Israel end its lawless occupation, dismantle its settlements and allow the Palestinians to breathe, is the root cause of the emergence of Hamas as the leading force in Palestinian politics. In much the same way, the Hizbullah resistance movement emerged as the strongest single force in Lebanese politics because the U.S. allowed Israel to remain in occupation of southern Lebanon for 22 years.

The key question today is whether any form of compromise is possible between a reformed and more robust Palestinian Authority, dominated by Hamas, and an Israeli government led by acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, head of the new right-of-centre party Kadima. A lot will depend on the results of the 28 March elections in Israel. If Kadima wins a clear mandate, Olmert may yet spring some surprises, perhaps in alliance with Amir Peretz's Labour Party.

On paper, the two sides remain too far apart for a deal to seem possible.

In a major speech on 24 January setting out Israeli strategy and aspirations, Ehud Olmert declared: "Israel will maintain control over the security zones [generally thought to include the Jordan Valley], the Jewish settlement blocs, and those places which have supreme national importance to the Jewish people, first and foremost a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty. There can be no Jewish state without the capital of Jerusalem at its centre? We will not allow the entry of Palestinian refugees into the State of Israel."

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An answer came from Khalid Mish'al, head of the political bureau of Hamas, in several recent speeches and interviews, and in an article in *The Guardian* on 31 January. Hamas, he wrote, will "never give up the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people." Nothing in the world, he declared, would deter Hamas "from pursuing our goal of liberation and return."

To the Israelis, he said: "Our conflict with you is not religious but political? We shall never recognise the right of any power to rob us of our land and deny us our national rights." But, he added, "If you are willing to accept the principle of a long-term truce, we are prepared to negotiate the terms. Hamas is extending a hand of peace to those who are truly interested in a peace based on justice."

Hamas is, in fact, demanding reciprocity from Israel. It will stop its suicide bombings -- it has in fact already observed a 10-month long truce -- if Israel, in turn, stops its targeted assassinations. It will talk peace if Israel renounces unilateral expansion, withdraws from the occupied territories, and agrees that Jerusalem must be shared.

Some Arab states, and in particular Egypt and Jordan already at peace with Israel, have been as alarmed as the Western powers by the victory of Hamas. The appeal by Hamas for aid and solidarity from Arab and Muslim states threatens to expose them as defeatists and collaborators. Egypt is seeking to reconcile Hamas with its rival Fatah as well as to persuade Hamas to endorse the resolution of the Arab summit of March 2002, held in Beirut, which offered Israel peace and normal relations with the entire Arab world if it withdrew to the 1967 borders. Sharon rejected the offer scornfully.

Israel now has a clear choice between pursuing Sharon's policy of imposing Israel's expanded frontiers by brute force on a hostile Palestinian population, and inevitably facing violent resistance, or of exploring the possibility of a compromise settlement.

The whole world, and especially Israel's friends in the West, should back this latter course because it may be the last chance of peace in this generation before the expanding 'facts on the ground' condemn both sides to continued warfare.

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Patrick Seale is a leading British writer on the Middle East, and the author of *The Struggle for Syria*; also, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*; and *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire*.

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