

Don't kiss, just talk

Michael Bröning's reply to Matthew Lewitt's criticism "Score one for Hamaswood" (<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2009/08/score-one-for-hamaswood/>)

In a recent [contribution](#) to the *Foreign Affairs* website, I argued that " Hamas is in the midst of an unprecedented ideological transformation," and that Western decision-makers have until now widely ignored these changes to the detriment of all involved. Instead of acknowledging change within Hamas, decision-makers remain focused on misleading reassertions of "facts" and continue to base their assessments on outdated Hamas statements such as the 1988 Hamas Charter.

In light of recent and more moderate Hamas policy declarations, and in view of the party's comprehensive state-building activities in Gaza, I suggested that "Western diplomats should acknowledge the organization's reduced aspirations and ideological softening" rather than "focusing on Hamas' unbending symbolic positions." This, last but not least, is pertinent given that the Charter today seems more widely quoted in Western capitals than in the Palestinian Territories.

A modification in the Western approach appears necessary in view of the failed boycott that has been in place for the better part of two decades. This approach has left Western decision-makers with limited policy options and has resulted in an increasingly popular Hamas.

Matthew Levitt, one of the foremost American experts on Hamas, has [rejected](#) this argument on the grounds that Hamas "continues to advance its strategic goals through ongoing terrorist activities, robust radicalization, and the election of militant hardliners to leadership positions." My argument in *Foreign Affairs* was thus interpreted as "score one" for Hamas, and my reasoning perceived as weakening the boycott and legitimizing Hamas as a political movement.

This criticism, however, is unconvincing. First, it is questionable whether a political movement that enjoys the support of roughly 40 percent of Palestinians is truly in need of a public relations campaign to bolster its standing in the West. Hamas has not only won municipal elections in many towns in the West Bank but has also gained a landslide victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. To describe a much-needed re-evaluation of Hamas as falling into the trap of a "public relations blitz" thus seems rather detached from the actual political developments on the ground. Hamas is a significant player in one of the world's most complicated conflict zones, and will continue to be relevant with or without Western endorsement.

Second, Levitt bases his argument on a cursory and incomplete stock-taking of Hamas' current behavior, focusing on recent events selected out of context. He begins his reply by arguing that Hamas' military wing "continues to engage in terrorist activities," as "shooting attacks are still common along the border between Israel and Gaza." Make no mistake about it: Every rocket that is fired from Gaza on Israeli homes is an unacceptable contravention of the rules of war and a clear violation of international law. Such attacks have been rightly condemned by numerous governments and non-

governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. The Israeli Army not only has the right to prevent such attacks, but is also obliged to protect its citizens.

However, to argue that Hamas mortar shells today “rain down on Israel” is both an inaccurate and outdated representation of reality. While authoritative data is yet to be released, the Israeli Army reported that this year between June 13 and July 16, there was one rocket attack. According to the official Israeli Army spokesperson, this rocket “was fired from the Shujaiya district of Gaza City and fell in a field near the Nahal Oz kibbutz.” The current level of violence at the border does constitute a substantial decrease when compared to roughly 3,000 mortars and rockets that were launched from Gaza in 2008.

This improvement at the Israeli-Gaza border does not stand alone. Concerning suicide-attacks in Israel, Hamas has also refrained from engaging in any terrorist operations since 2006. Contrary to popular belief, this decline cannot be attributed to the West Bank barrier, which remains incomplete and has proven easy to penetrate.

Levitt rejects any such improvement by referring to Hamas leader Khaled Mashal’s recent explanation for this change. Mashal states that “not targeting civilians is part of an evaluation of the movement [Hamas] to serve the [Palestinian] people’s interest.” While this statement might be criticized for lack of empathy, the shift towards non-violence and the resulting relative quiet should be welcomed.

Levitt’s second argument states that Hamas is currently engaged in an effort to “radicalize Palestinian society” and to “inspire Palestinians to reject compromise or peaceful solutions to the conflict.” To bolster this claim, Levitt refers to Hamas summer camps, which in 2009 allegedly included “Islamic teachings” and “semi-military training with toy guns.”

While similar claims could easily be made for activities of public youth organizations from Russia to the People’s Republic of China, it remains to be seen whether “toy gun” war games should prevent responsible decision-makers from diplomatic engagement. Indeed, it must also be asked how Hamas leaders manage to “inspire Palestinians to reject compromise or peaceful solutions,” while they simultaneously engage in a widespread and public Arabic television campaign, repeatedly advocating for the parameters of a two-state solution.

In Levitt’s opinion, policy outlines such as Khaled Mashal’s recently televised speech from Damascus should be rejected as propaganda in view of a Gaza film production on Hamas terrorist Emad Akel. The production of this feature film points to the fact that violent resistance and a cult of martyrdom remain widespread in Palestinian society. However, the screening of the film in the cultural center Shawwa—Levitt errs in writing that the film was screened at the Islamic University—can hardly be considered more authoritative than officially declared party policies as outlined in numerous election pamphlets and public statements. To base political analysis of recent Hamas positions on the study of a feature film, seems notably discriminatory to say the least. How would Levitt engage Palestinian decision-makers if they based “informed”

assessments of the Obama administration on a cursory study of current Hollywood productions? Feature films certainly have a place in society and may be relevant in pertinent cultural studies courses, but should not be considered a sound basis for political analysis and responsible decision making.

Furthermore, Levitt attempts to bolster his argument for an unchanged Hamas by pointing at recent Shura elections—the equivalent of a Hamas parliament. He argues that “ongoing radical activities are particularly apparent in [Hamas’] willingness to place its most militant members in positions of power.” This claim is supported by listing three militant activists: Salah Al-Aroui, Abd al-Khaliq al-Natsheh and Abbas al-Sayyed. The three are widely reputed for their uncompromising and confrontational positions with Israel.

What Levitt fails to mention is that the Shura Council consists of 73 persons of which he has selectively chosen three as representative of the Council in its entirety. Is the election of three hardliners truly indicative of the Council’s inflexible hidden agenda? Are the statements of Hamas’ politburo chief Mashal thus discredited and easily dismissed? One could argue the opposite: The fact that Hamas’ current moderate policy declarations are also issued by renowned hardliners should be interpreted as the beginning of an ideological transformation rather than a dramatic tactical maneuver maliciously backed by Arab decision-makers from Cairo to Damascus. This is so especially in view of Hamas’ current state-building activities on the ground, a nearly comprehensive de facto ceasefire with Israel, and open calls for a de facto two-state solution.

The current attempts—especially by some factions in Israel’s security establishment—to reject these new policies as “a public-relations blitz for tactical gains” are noteworthy for different reasons. First, it seems rather peculiar that Hamas statements are only taken at face value when they support Western expectations of militancy and irrationality. After all, in the last twenty years, the Hamas Charter has been quoted relentlessly to prove beyond a doubt the movement’s annihilationist agenda. While Hamas statements have thus served as convenient points of reference for Western observers in the past, today, more moderate voices are rejected as mere “rhetoric.” Effectively, such a circular argument leaves no room for development and progress in a meaningful peace process. Following this line of reasoning, even an official revocation of the Hamas Charter by the Shura Council would undoubtedly be rejected as strategic camouflage by experts who today demand such a move. In the end, this argument tells us more about the rigid mindset of its proponents than about the actual situation on the ground.

To be clear: Hamas cannot be regarded as a democratic, just and secular force in the Palestinian Territories. The movement must be scrutinized and the ever-present idolatry of Palestinian martyrdom justifies severe admonition and continuous criticism. However, in light of recent developments, Hamas should be engaged via diplomatic processes that acknowledge the party’s capacity for ideological softening and political realism. Hamas must be recognized as a relevant political player. Only such an approach will pave the way for a political process that is in the best interest of Israelis and Palestinians.

The alternative to such a readjustment of Western policy would be an ongoing boycott and an unsustainable adherence to the status quo. Already in 1989, Thomas Friedman observed that this Middle-East dogma could be paraphrased as “I will stop beating you as soon as you start loving me.” Such a development is as unlikely today as it was twenty years ago. Certainly, love does not and will not characterize the relationship between Hamas and the West or Hamas and Israel. However, finding the means and the mechanism to stop the cycle of beating could quite simply begin with a diplomatic challenge.

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