

Hamas and beyond: The linkage between rhetoric and reality

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In his column last week, in this paper, Prof. K. Stein equated the rise of Hamas to the ascent of Egypt's Nasser (7/23/1952), the overthrow of Iran's Shah (1/16/1979) and (Saddam) Hussein's fall (April 2003). He then provided an elaborate explanation of why Hamas won the elections. Indeed, this is what historians do so well: they document historical events and then explain why they happened. Problem is that this sequence is starting to look more like Monday morning quarterbacking. While there is great value to pure historical research, there is a point where one would like to also evidence some sound predictions as to possible outcomes.

After all, it does not take a historian to connect the dots and realize that the writing was on the wall in all those developments. Particularly so in connection with the Iranian revolution where the Islamist inscriptions were sprayed on campus walls all over the US, visible to (if not understandable by) all. This is particularly pertinent when we consider that if it is possible to enumerate and explain events so eloquently AFTER they occurred, how is it there is such a dearth of likely scenarios BEFORE they emerge. To the experts, if these developments are so obvious after they happened, we should also benefit from their wisdom in advance.

This does not take away from the milestone importance of these events but it leaves us more than shortchanged by being fed ex-post-facto explanations without a view of what is likely to happen. Stein himself admits that he does not know. Honest but not very helpful. Knowing ahead of time is not merely "important." It is a matter of life and death. To illustrate, take the Arab strategic wave of violence (wrongly called the "second intifada") that erupted after (not because) of Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount. Historians (including Prof. Stein) saw it at the time as a public disorder that police would be able to handle within a couple-three weeks at the most. This ignored at least two previous events that lasted several years (the "events" also known as the "Arab Revolt" of 1936-1939, and the first wave of Arab violence, 1987-1993). So feigning "shock" over the outcome of Hamas's election victory is indicative of the real shock we should be cognizant of: that too many experts who deal with the Middle East have excellent hindsight but not much foresight. A timely understanding that the wave of violence that started on September 28, 2000 was not merely a public disorder was sorely lacking.

Indeed, having the luxury of hindsight does not necessarily yield the kind of analysis that is conducive to a cogent understanding of what happened (and yes, of what is likely to occur). Stein recognizes that "Its (Hamas) rhetoric calls for Israel's elimination" and he then instructs Hamas directly: "realistically its objective must be to govern and at least control the education curriculum, social welfare, health care and religious affairs." If only Hamas would listen. Stein adds: "Hamas will have to find a formula that does not drop its political objectives but is sufficiently moderate in tone and action and open to cash flow." Hamas already found it without moderating its tone even a bit. Cash flow does not seem to be a problem since Saudi Arabia

already pledged \$100 and Iran committed to provide their needs. Russia and France may not be far behind. There could not be more expedient "dire straights" for the Hamas as it ascends to power. Incentives to change their reason for existence are yet to be found.

Stein may be right that "only Hamas is capable of making core ideological compromises with Israel..." but where in the last century can we see a precedent that such changes have ever been made? And if so, why give any credibility to the likelihood that Hamas will make and adopt them? Peace with Egypt and Jordan? Those are practical arrangements that could easily change with a Hamas like revolution in Jordan and the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt. The Israeli (and Western) love affair with the PLO? The PLO is yet to change its "covenant" that seeks to destroy Israel. The PLO's covenant is more "secular" in nature. That of Hamas is religious and not changeable.

Stein ends with an interesting observation that "Palestinian self-determination will have an impact on the region for decades... what is unknown is what impact it will be." Let me suggest one highly predictable impact: Israel will cease to exist if Palestinians will have their "self-determination." This is not because there is anything negative inherent in the concept of self-determination. It is admirable. The problem is that their self-determination has been consistently defined by the negation of the self-determination of the other. The Jew. The Israeli. And yes, that include the PLO and the PA.

The PLO has "agreed" to Oslo as pragmatic and calculated steps that were always part and parcel of an overall plan to annihilate Israel. And then came Geneva. The PLO and Hamas want the same thing. They just go about it in different ways and the PLO-affiliated Fatah has already increased its terror activity. Hamas will not govern between rhetoric and reality as Stein suggested, as it will not compromise on its goal. It will govern WITH its rhetoric (which it proudly repeats daily) and will create a reality for Israel and the West irrespective of how costly it will be for them and the people they represent. Even under the best scenario of a so-called cease-fire for a decade or so, Hamas is committed to fight Israel later (when it is stronger). We owe our children not to leave them such a promisingly disastrous inheritance.

For those needing an illustration of its rhetoric read carefully the Hamas Covenant (1988). For example, Article 7 (out of 36, ironically: twice "Chai" in Hebrew) emphasize that: "...Moslems who adhere to the ways of the Islamic Resistance Movement ...strive towards enhancing its struggle, the Movement is a universal one... He who denies its right, evades supporting it and turns a blind eye to facts, whether intentionally or unintentionally, would awaken to see that events have overtaken him..." If this aspiration for absolute dominance is not clear, the covenant relies on their prophet who "...has said: "The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him..." (see <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/hamas.htm>).

So here is some connecting of dots. The advantage for Israel and the West of the rise of Hamas to power is that the rhetoric (and reality) is now cast in sharp contrasts rather than the nebulous language used by Arafat and his successor. At least we know now where we stand. But Hamas is part of a wider phenomenon. The increase of power of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (whose

ideology has been a lighthouse for Al-Qaida), the radicalization of the Arab world and many Muslim countries, the radicalization of Islamists in Europe and the US (as well as Canada and Latin America) all auger badly for the future. Hamas, Hizbollah, Iran and Syria are now the axis of radical Islam. From a Jewish and Israeli perspective, Ahmadinejad (with his daily threats to wipe out Israel) poses the greatest threat to our very existence since Hitler. Similarly, it is not only Jews who will be impacted but also the rest of the free world as Iranian missiles are now capable of reaching the heart of Europe.

The latest storm that "erupted" over the publication of "offending" cartoons epitomizes not spontaneity over being offended but rather a carefully calculated move on the part of the key players: the Iranians are interested in deflecting attention from their nuclear intentions, the Syrians in deflecting attention from being in the cross-hair of the US over supporting insurgency in Iraq and terror in Lebanon and Israel, Hizbollah (an arm of Iran) is interested in exerting power and taking over Lebanon. The cartoons (three of which are reported to have been fabricated) just provide a convenient pretext the same way that Sharon's visit gave the gift of the trigger (pun intended) for Arab violence. None of these embassy burnings would have taken place had the regimes of these terror states not wanted them to happen. Ironically, the reaction to the cartoons only strengthens the western perception about Islamist violence.

This conflict is not about being nice, about being rational, about being compassionate, about respecting the other's values or about self-determination. This is a much wider conflict over power, domination, and the definition of the narrative that will bring about the hegemony of Islamist radicals over those who are not (and this includes not only Jews, Christians, and Buddhists, but also moderate Muslims). No matter what kind of diplomatic efforts the West will make to appease Iran or accommodate the "soon-to-compromise" Hamas. These efforts are doomed to fail for two reasons: first, they stand in the way of achieving the radicals' objectives, and second, there are no real incentives (positive or negative) for them to change their ways.

This is not necessarily a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1993) but could certainly become one the longer we wait. It seems that the best service we can provide ourselves at this point is not to assume that the enemy thinks like we do or wants what we do. Different parameters are at play for the enemy and they are deeply alien to our core beliefs. Perhaps we should understand more deeply what the current enmity is all about and who the enemy is. We already have the lessons of WWII. Have we learned them?