

Hamas

In Biblical Hebrew "hamas" means "violence". But I think we should be glad that Hamas has won the Palestinian elections. It is a victory for democracy.

It is a victory against corruption, because under the old Fatah regime billions of foreign aid from mainly non-Arab and non-Muslim donors simply went into private bank accounts. It never ever went anywhere near relieving the poverty and suffering of Palestinians wherever they were unless of course they were martyrs. Remember hundreds of thousands are still forced by Arab governments to remain in festering camps on their Muslim, Arab territories.

Whatever other fears one may have about Hamas, they were and are seen to be a caring, socially concerned and a less corruptible collection of people than the old gangsters that Arafat surrounded himself with.

Yes, I know they are ideologically anti-Semitic. So, sadly, is most of the Arab world. Under the PLO, the territories were awash with the crudest anti-Semitic literature and hate TV programs. The surprising thing is that so many are still not!

Yes, I also know that Hamas is committed to the destruction and obliteration of Israel. At least one knows where one stands, unlike with the old Palestinian double-talk of condemning terrorism to the outside while supporting and encouraging it inside. "Know your enemy" is the first lesson of warfare. With Arafat and Fatah one never knew what they really believed.

It has been clear for ages to any fair observer (of whom, I fear, there are very few) that the old PLO was incapable of governing a kindergarten, let alone a state. Factions were killing and undermining each other and setting up independent fiefdoms. They have been undermining Abu Mazen, the nice but totally incompetent and powerless figurehead. On the ground the men with the guns made the Russian Mafia look like pussycats.

So at least the air has been cleared and it is now clear that most Palestinians are not left-wing moderates, but absolutists of the exact same mindset as the Iranian President Ahmadinejad. Will all this make any difference to the world outside or change their opinion? Fuhgeddaboutit. Not one whit. On the contrary, Left Wingers and neo-Marxists have already shown that they'd be much happier as allies of Gay-Bashing, Virgin-Slaying, Suicidal Religious Fundamentalists than with liberal, utilitarian, secular Israelis who allow gay equality, despise religion, and have an independent Supreme Court and rights.

However, let me be positive in other ways. Up to now Hamas has agreed to a Hudnah, a ceasefire. The recent attacks on Israel from Palestinian territory, have not come from Hamas, but from Fatah factions such as Islamic Jihad. Hamas has declared it will continue its Hudnah if Israel does. I would rather have Hamas abiding by its Hudnah while calling for Israel's destruction than Fatah declaring it supports Israel's right to exist while doing whatever it

can, in whatever way possible, to destroy it. At least if Hamas says something it tends to stick to it. Fatah never stuck to anything.

It is true that now more money will be channeled into Hamas, despite protestations, and from there some of it will go to arms. But under Fatah I suggest 90% went to arms and 10% went to human needs. Now I suspect the proportions might be reversed.

There have been many examples of terrorist organizations that made the transition from terror to peace. I believe that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely and that often goes for religion too. But power also forces people to accommodate. When one is responsible there is a better chance of acting responsibly than when one is free to rebel. Indeed more concessions came from Israeli ex-extremists than from liberals.

It was actually Israel that helped establish Hamas because its Divide and Rule policy led it to believe that establishing a counterbalance to Fatah would weaken Palestinian political power. Of course it did not. Thank goodness Israeli generals are not as incompetent as its politicians, or indeed its Secret Service. But secular Israel has always misunderstood religion—its own, let alone others. Once you let the genie of fundamentalism out of the bottle it goes wild. The history of the Middle East is one in which moderate religion always loses out to extremes. It's partly the nature of fundamentalist, or monochromatic, simplistic religion. It is partly the way political alliances are formed. Everywhere in the Middle East now extreme religion is on the ascendancy.

I see this as beneficial in that it can be a wake-up call both because it shows that caring can win votes and because it may lead to putting more energy and support into moderate religion, instead of the usual secular response to go the other way. It has always fascinated me how secular Jews very often feel more comfortable with extremists whom they know are poles apart from them and therefore can be regarded as romantic fossils or amusing phenomena. Moderate religious people present a greater challenge. They appear as "normal" as the next guy. They live a "modern" life. So the question is, "Why am I not behaving religiously?" They cannot be as easily dismissed. If this is true of Judaism it is true of Islam, too. So after the initial euphoria, perhaps counter forces for moderate religion might emerge. Life always goes in cycles.

What will all this do to the peace process? What peace process? So far there's only unilateralism. I'd love to think it will get going again and if you listen carefully there are some positive sounds. But more likely a Hamas government will reinforce Israel's determination to withdraw behind defensible barriers.

I hope there will be a fairer regime within Palestinian territories, and then the separation of the antagonists will help the long healing process that eventually might lead somewhere. I'd like to think that reason will win. History in the Middle East does not hold out much hope. But we can always fall back on the Messiah!! Though I do pray, I'm not holding my breath.

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