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Bring in Hamas

By Henry Siegman

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Last October, a bipartisan group of eminent former senior government officials, including Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Lee Hamilton and Paul Volcker, urged President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice not to entertain the fantasy that an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord can be negotiated with Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, without the participation of Hamas.

They urged that a way be found to include Hamas - which had overwhelmingly defeated Abbas's Fatah in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 2006 - in the negotiations.

The eminent persons group recognized that Hamas presented its own difficulties as a potential peace partner because of its dogmatic refusal to recognize the state of Israel.

That is why Arab countries, intimately familiar with the dynamics of regional politics, including those of Islamic political movements, supported the formation of a Palestinian unity government that would join Abbas's Fatah with Hamas. Saudi Arabia took the lead in fashioning the Mecca agreement on Feb. 8, 2007, establishing such a government.

Although Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and other Arab countries are themselves threatened by internal Islamic movements, they nevertheless advocated such a unity government because that would make it possible for that government to recognize Israel and to negotiate an agreement without Hamas making an ideological transformation of which it is not yet capable.

Such a transformation, however desirable, was in fact unnecessary for a peace process to begin since Hamas had committed itself to allowing Abbas, as the elected president of the Palestinian Authority, to conduct the negotiations with Israel. Hamas also committed itself to submit the agreement to a popular referendum and to abide by its outcome.

Instead of embracing this creative approach - one that would also serve to encourage the moderates within Hamas - both Israel and the United States rejected the unity government. They insisted on Hamas's ideological capitulation - and, should it refuse to do so, on its violent removal by Abbas's security forces, which were being armed, financed and trained by the United States for this purpose.

To Bush and Rice, not to speak of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his defense minister, Ehud Barak - who tirelessly lecture the Palestinians and the Arab and Muslim worlds on the subject of democracy - the violent overthrow of a democratically elected government was thus the preferred course of action. That Bush and Rice purported to be outraged by Hamas's consequent recourse to violence in response to U.S. and Israeli plans to overthrow it establishes a new level of hypocrisy — or of intellectual bankruptcy.

An article in the current *Vanity Fair* magazine reports that Bush assigned to Rice and Deputy National Security Adviser Elliot Abrams the task of provoking a civil war in which Abbas's Fatah militias in Gaza were to overthrow the Hamas-led government. According to the article, this decision was made by Bush shortly after the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, while Hamas was still observing its cease-fire.

David Wurmser, until recently Vice President Dick Cheney's chief Middle East advisor, told *Vanity Fair* that "what happened wasn't so much a coup by Hamas but an attempted coup by Fatah that was pre-empted [by Hamas] before it could happen."

Bush and Rice now face a dilemma of their own making. Surely after the latest violence in Gaza they can no longer deny what some critics have said from the outset, that there is no prospect of Abbas engaging Israel in successful negotiations so long as Hamas is denied participation in Palestinian governance. You cannot make peace with half of a country's population and remain at war with the other half.

Furthermore, Olmert's confirmation that Israel's assaults on Gaza had Abbas's blessings have finished Abbas for all practical purposes as an interlocutor in peace talks with Israel, even for West Bank residents, unless he gets the backing of Hamas.

And Abbas's claim that Hamas invited Al Qaeda's operatives into Gaza, echoing a lie first made by an Israeli cabinet member, confirmed for many Palestinians that holding on to the reins of power is more important to Abbas than the Palestinian national cause.

Abbas knows that Hamas has consistently rejected Al-Qaeda's efforts to exploit the Palestinian tragedy to advance a Wahabi jihadism that Hamas publicly condemned as inconsistent with the Palestinians' national struggle.

One must assume that after the latest exchanges of violence in Gaza - and the reaction of the international community to what were seen as disproportionate Israeli retaliations - relying on Israel's military might to eliminate Hamas is no longer seen by Bush and Rice as a promising alternative.

It is therefore time for them to heed the sober advice of the eminent persons group that urged a more nuanced policy toward Hamas. It's time to take advantage of Hamas's offer of a mutual cease-fire that would not only end the killing in Gaza and the West Bank and the rocket fire on Sderot and Ashkelon, but also prevent a potentially calamitous escalation threatened by Barak.

Such a cease-fire would also offer an opportunity to refashion - with the collaboration of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Arab countries - a Palestinian unity government that could resume peace talks on a more realistic foundation.

To be sure, Olmert and Barak will rail against such a course, but a majority of Israel's public favors reaching out to Hamas.

What hope there is for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement before the two-state option evaporates depends on the United States finally screwing up the political and moral courage to use its considerable leverage with Israel and the Palestinians to return them to a path of sanity.

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