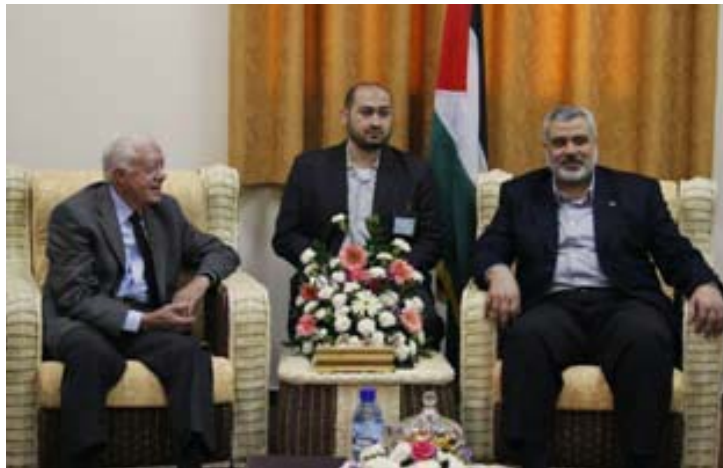


ENGAGING HAMAS: RETHINKING THE QUARTET PRINCIPLES

The Middle East Quartet, composed of the UN, the US, Russia and the EU, has laid out three conditions for the recognition of a Palestinian government: the renunciation of violence, the recognition of Israel's right to exist and a commitment to all agreements signed by the PLO and Israel.



Former US President Jimmy Carter, left, sits with Ismail Haniyeh, head of Gaza's Hamas government, during their meeting in Haniyeh's office in Gaza City, 16 June 2009.

However, a softening of these requirements could directly contribute to a transformation of Hamas, and in turn strengthen the prospects for peace in the Middle East.

There have been promising signs in this respect with the recent demonstration by the EU of an increasing flexibility in its expression of the Quartet Principles. While in 2007 the EU recalled 'its readiness to work with and resume its direct assistance to a Palestinian government whose policy and actions reflect the Quartet principles',¹ in 2008 it indicated that it 'supports Egypt's mediation efforts for intra-Palestinian reconciliation.' This observable shift in language seems starker when considering that the Council of the EU made no mention of the Principles in its January and December

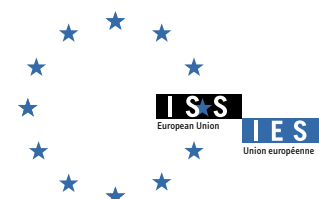
1. Statement by the Council of the EU on the Middle East peace process following a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg, 23 April 2007.

2009 conclusions on the Middle East process.

Arguably, accepting the necessity of intra-Palestinian reconciliation is no longer an issue for the European Union. Equally however, it can be argued that this acceptance comes at a rather late stage. Clearly, the EU has a stake in the current polarisation of Fatah and Hamas. Its

'West Bank first' approach has contributed to the diminishing chance for engaging with a coherent Palestinian negotiating partner capable of implementing any diplomatic progress.

If, however, the EU is indeed in its 'teenage years' and still has to come to grips with asserting itself in world politics, the development of proactive policies would constitute the ideal testing ground for its political clout. The EU's apparent readiness to relax the three Quartet Principles could provide the necessary rite of passage. Instead of resorting to reactive measures only when recognising mistakes made and damage caused, the time might be right for taking a risk. Things might indeed turn risky if Hamas seeks to capitalise on an opportunity to decide a potential win-lose situation in its favour. However, considering that the isolation of Hamas has proven to be a setback for peace efforts,



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waiting for the right time to engage might turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy and reinforce the belatedness of the EU's response capacity.

A watering down of the Quartet Principles is a step in the right direction towards strengthening peace prospects in the Middle East. Only by bringing in all political players can the rug be pulled out from under peace spoilers. But despite the necessity of an inclusive approach, the Middle East Quartet has made political and financial cooperation with the Palestinian Authority dependent on the recognition of the three Quartet Principles. As Hamas opted not to succumb directly to these conditions, the US - supported by the EU - chose to cut financial aid to Gaza, to politically isolate Hamas and to favour Fatah's security forces. These measures directly contribute to Hamas' resistance to accepting the Quartet Principles, turning the emphasis on the three conditions into an end *per se*.

Firstly, the West's policy of economic isolation might have been successful in 'starving the Haniyeh government of funds.'² The policy, however, not only backfired because of its contribution to Hamas' turning to other financial providers such as Syria or Iran, but also because of the self-understanding of the 'Islamic Resistance Movement'. Hamas emerged as a provider of social services in the first place. Cutting these services should logically play directly into the hands of the group. This logic is reconfirmed by the role Islamism plays in Hamas' self-understanding. Azzam Tamimi describes how the founders of Hamas were convinced that 'only a morality based on Islam could equip a jobless or penniless inhabitant of Gaza to say no to an Israeli officer offering him or her a comfortable life, a good job, or a permit to travel abroad for employment or education in exchange for collaborating with the authorities'.³ When Hamas supporters 'prefer to die than to take food from Israel'⁴ as one member of the group stated in an interview in Damascus in 2008, cutting aid will not starve the movement into peace. Instead of luring Hamas into recognising Israel, further pressure will give the group more opportunities to mobilise support.

Secondly, the West's policy of political isolation makes the conflict even more intractable. Its non-recognition of Hamas because of the movement's non-recognition of Israel falls short of a full comprehension of the radicalisation dynamics within Palestine. Many Palestinians

perceive Fatah – which stands for those endorsing recognition of Israel – as corrupt and co-responsible for pressure and shortages. As the price Fatah has paid in popularity terms is too high for Hamas, its leaders cannot easily abide by previous diplomatic agreements: this would be tantamount to political suicide. Precisely because the ambition of Hamas is to avoid the same fate as Fatah, any moderation on the part of Hamas can only result from concessions and not be its precondition. Clearly, if the group comes to compromise without anything in return, it must fear the loss of its support base to more resistant groups such as the Islamic Jihad. When Hamas members caution that 'if we give up on our homeland, then our children and the generations to come will not forgive us,'⁵ it becomes apparent that the group is almost forced into its resistance role. Put bluntly, not recognising Hamas translates into its refusal to recognise Israel.

Thirdly, the emphasis on supporting Fatah may have indirectly contributed to the inability of Hamas to renounce violence. In order to support the Palestinian civil police with training as well as equipment, the EU established the European Police Mission for the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS). As the EU refuses to work with Hamas, EUPOL COPPS only took effect in the West Bank. This has augmented Palestinian suspicions that the Mission was biased in favour of Fatah. The politicisation of the security forces⁶ and the EU's backing of Fatah push Hamas even further into a corner. Unfortunately, by focusing on training the civil police in the West Bank only, the EU is unwittingly relinquishing control over Hamas' forces.

Emphasising the three Quartet Principles distances Hamas further from complying with them. Relaxing the conditions, however, could directly contribute to a willingness on the part of Hamas to become more moderate.

Making the explicit recognition of Israel a pre-condition for talks forfeits the opportunity of restraint or moderation through dialogue. Emanuele Ottolenghie, the former Director of the Transatlantic Institute, argues that upgrading relations with Israel would mean that the EU has more influence over Israel.⁷ The same reasoning can be applied to Hamas: moderation is often the result of engagement and not its precondition. After all, one negotiates with the enemy. Finally, if

2. Muriel Asseburg, 'Hamastan vs. Fatahland: A chance for progress in the Middle East', Comment, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 14 July 2007.

3. Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History from Within* (Olive Branch Press, 2007), p. 14.

4. Author's interview with Hamas member, Damascus, August 2008. The author conducted interviews with 5 Hamas members in Syria in the summer of 2008.

5. Author's interview with Hamas member, Damascus, summer 2008.

6. See Ezra Bulut, 'EUPOL COPPS', in Giovanni Grevi, Damien Helly, Daniel Keohane (eds.), *European Security and Defence Policy: The first 10 Years*, EUISS (2009), pp. 287-298.

7. See Emanuele Ottolenghie, 'Squaring the Circle: EU-Israel Relations and the Peace Process in the Middle East', Paper published as part of the debate series of the Centre for European Studies, 2010, p. 34.

Hamas accepted dialogue with Israel – even mediated through third parties – the group would already be beginning to move in a grey recognition/non-recognition zone. Why not capitalise on such a step forward?

Instead of using the opportunity that dialogue itself provides for the creation of a clear negotiation partner, Israel often argues that there is no coherent Palestinian protagonist to negotiate with in the first place. But it is precisely through negotiations that groups are forced to consolidate and determine who speaks for them. Reducing the emphasis on the principle that Hamas must abide by previous agreements would directly contribute to a strengthening of intra-Palestinian dialogue. Opening up a serious debate between Fatah and Hamas about the representation of Palestinians would allow for intra-Palestinian reconciliation and could foster the creation of a dialogue partner for Israel in the long term.

Finally, the Quartet insists that Hamas must renounce violence. The reasoning of current Western policies is based on the assumption that Hamas needs to be weakened in order to moderate it. However, it is through pressure that negotiation and moderation become precisely less rational. This is in contrast to the common understanding that the opposite is the case. No actor wants to negotiate out of weakness, but instead seeks a strong negotiating position. Renouncing violence can – paradoxically – make peace less rational: “What takes place at the moment is not peace. In Islam, ‘just peace’ is when everyone benefits and is happy. What they want us to do is accept defeat and surrender. In surrender, the enemy rules over you. In peace, you are equal with the enemy.”⁸

8. Author’s interview with Hamas member, Damascus, summer 2008.

The inequality and asymmetry between Israel and Hamas is obvious. The weaker group, however, attempts to address the deficit in military might with a stronger ideological commitment. The reactions of Hamas provide an example *par excellence*: ‘Just because somebody is stronger does not mean that we will stop fighting!’⁹ Instead, as expressed by one Hamas member, ‘people’s force is like water. In water, there is the particle of hydrogen that can be more dangerous than the nuclear bomb. This is the balance that we see’.¹⁰ Thus, in order to decrease this overinvestment in commitment, it would be wise not to insist on disarmament early on, since doing so would increase the perceived and factual weakness of the group and hence motivate further commitment.

The Northern Ireland example is a case in point: giving a bonus of trust and goodwill can yield dividends. Since the IRA did not agree to decommission its arms as a precondition for peace talks, progress was achieved when the process moved along two tracks: political negotiations on the one side and the decommissioning of weapons on the other. The Northern Ireland lesson, according to the EUISS 2008 Washington Forum Seminar Report, teaches us that decommissioning should not serve as a necessary precondition to the start of talks – a lesson that could be heeded when dealing with Hamas.

Just as an insistence on adherence to the three Quartet Principles is self-defeating and lessens the chances of compliance, a weakening of these requirements could directly contribute to a transformation of Hamas, and in turn strengthen the prospects for peace in the Middle East. While behaving proactively can be diplomatically precarious, the EU should now take a calculated risk and ensure that its shift in tenor is followed by proactive steps in its future dealings with Hamas.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*