

{JANUARY 26 2006}

TO TALK WITH HAMAS

LIKE two very tired wrestlers who clasp each other, unable to separate, the Israeli and Palestinian societies are glued to each other.

The Palestinian elections this week took place in the shadow of the Israeli elections. Who is Ehud Olmert? Has the Labor Party really changed? Will the next Israeli government really be prepared to negotiate? Which Palestinian leadership stands a better chance of liberating us from the occupation?

The Israeli elections, in exactly two months, will take place in the shadow of the Palestinian elections. What to do about the Hamas victory? Should we be ready to negotiate with a Palestinian government that includes - God forbid! - Hamas ministers?

Palestinians know a lot about the Israeli democracy. But for Israelis, the Palestinian democracy is an unknown quantity.

Of course, elections, by themselves, do not prove that a system is really democratic. There are all kinds of elections.

There used to be elections in the Soviet Union. A voter entered a polling station, was given a sealed envelope and told to put it into the ballot box. "Why, am I not allowed to know for whom I am voting?" he asked. "Of course not," the official retorted indignantly, "in the Soviet Union, we respect the secrecy of the ballot!"

The opposite was true in the Egyptian village that I visited years ago on election day. The place was in a joyful carnival mood. At the polling station, everything was open and aboveboard. What is there to hide? Good-natured policemen helped old ladies to put the right vote (Mubarak) into the box. There was no other candidate.

But nobody who visited the West Bank in recent weeks could doubt for a moment that here a real democracy is growing - the first homegrown Arab democracy. True, there were some signs of anarchy, here and there armed groups threatened each other. But these were marginal events, greatly exaggerated by the media. The competition was real, the parties were real, politicians competed for power and influence. Every flat surface in towns and villages was plastered with colorful posters. Deafening

loudspeakers blared slogans and songs. And, most importantly, the voters were faced with a real choice between alternative and clear agendas - something that is not at all certain in the Israeli elections.

It is not easy to conduct elections under occupation, when the occupier is overtly fighting against one of the major parties, arresting and even killing candidates, keeping important leaders in prison, maintaining roadblocks everywhere. And, as is to be expected, when a dumb military machine interferes in political matters, the results are the opposite of those intended: the declarations and actions of the Israeli government against Hamas have mostly helped Hamas.

I spoke with one of the Fatah leaders about the actions of the Israeli government against Hamas in occupied East Jerusalem, where meetings were banned, candidates arrested and posters torn down. The man laughed: "What do they think? That the Hamas people need meetings and posters to know who to vote for? All these things only add to their appeal!" The results show that he was right.

Where does this Palestinian longing for democratic life stem from?

In this matter, too, there exists a wide gap between the generations - a gap that is one of the most obvious phenomena in Palestinian society.

The older generation, and especially the leaders who returned home with Yasser Arafat after the Oslo agreement, have never lived in a democratic society. Arafat himself spent his life wandering between Arab dictatorships: Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Tunisia. Lebanon, too, where every person is politically imprisoned in one or other of the authoritarian, sectarian fractions, is certainly far from being a real democracy. (Arafat always listened attentively when I held forth on the possibility of changing official Israeli policy by changing public opinion, but I did not get the impression that he had much faith in that really believed me.) The model that the older people were thinking about was a very limited, Jordan-style "democracy".

The middle generation has quite different ideas. Tens of thousands of them have been in Israeli prisons for long stretches, There they have learned Hebrew, listened to Israeli radio and watched Israeli TV. They have seen how Israeli democracy functions. That is the model they would like to adopt. (My friend, Sirhan Salameh, now the mayor of a-Ram, who has spent a total of 12 years in prison, told me: "What we enjoyed most were the scenes in the Knesset, where everybody shouts at the Prime Minister. We compared this to the situation in the Arab parliaments. We decided that we want a parliament like that.")

It must be said clearly: These elections are a huge achievement for the Palestinian society, a badge of honor for a people suffering under occupation, whose independent state is still a dream. Everyone who has a hat should take it off.

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In Israel this week, the Palestinian elections were the center of political attention. Ehud Olmert, always keen to exploit his standing as Acting Prime Minister in order to present himself as a Security leader, called a meeting of the usual bunch of generals and Shin-Bet types, who, as always, looked at the situation through a gunsight and exposed their usual lack of political insight. What to do if... How to behave when...

What emerged from all this was that Israel will not negotiate with a Palestinian government that includes Hamas. "We cannot be asked to negotiate with a group that calls for the destruction of Israel" etc. etc.

That is nonsense in tomato juice, as we say in Hebrew. Or, in a case like this, rather, nonsense in blood.

Israel must negotiate with whatever Palestinian leadership is elected by the Palestinian people. As in every conflict throughout history, one does not elect the leadership of the opponent - first, because the opponent will not accept this, and, just as importantly, because an agreement made with such a leadership will not hold.

The broader the leadership is, the better. If an agreement is reached, it is vitally important that all sections of the Palestinian people are committed to it. And it is essential to include the most extreme factions. If Hamas had not decided to take part in the elections, it should have been forced to do so.

A group that is ready to negotiate with Israel, thereby already recognizes the State of Israel. And if it is not ready to negotiate, the problem does not arise. A matter of simple logic. But generals and politicians are not professors of logic, nor apparently do they know much about negotiations and agreements.

On the Palestinian side: the very fact that Hamas is participating in elections that are based on the Oslo agreement proves that the Palestinian political system is moving in the direction of peace. On the face of it, the Hamas victory seems to be bad for peace. But the real result may be quite different: it may moderate the radical movement and make sure that any agreement reached will be solid and permanent.

On the Israeli side: the split in the Likud, the creation of Kadima, and the change in the Labor Party leadership all show that the Israeli political system is moving in the same general direction. The movement may be big or small - but the direction is clear.

After both sides form their new governments - they must talk to each other.