

The EU is wrong on the Palestinians

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The European Union approach toward the former Palestinian government led by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) formed in March 2006 was one of isolation; the EU and its member states refused dialogue, at least on an official level, and withdrew budget support. The EU intended to press Hamas into accepting the three conditions posed by the "Quartet" for continued cooperation and funding: renunciation of violence, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and acceptance of all treaties and agreements signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel.

At the same time, the Palestinian population was not meant to starve. The EU therefore, following a demand by the Quartet, devised a so-called "Temporary International Mechanism" (TIM) with the aim of maintaining basic services and infrastructure while circumventing the elected Palestinian government. TIM has been operating since late June 2006 through three "windows": one focusing on support for hospitals and clinics; a second on energy supply and access to water; and a third on social allowances transferred to the poorest part of the population and to key workers delivering essential services.

By the end of 2006, the European Commission had committed \$117 million to TIM, with European member states nearly matching that amount. Approximately 150,000 Palestinians have received financial support. Also, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' staff has received technical assistance and capacity building programs.

TIM has certainly helped to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in the Palestinian territories. But such a catastrophe was only a danger due to Western and Israeli policies: the cut-off of EU budget support; Israel's suspension of the value added tax and customs transfers to the Palestinian Authority; military operations in the Gaza Strip; and extensive closures of Gaza and the West Bank. While European aid to the Palestinians actually increased in 2006, the socio-economic situation in the Palestinian territories deteriorated further.

The EU approach has also been counterproductive with regards to state building and democratization. Governing institutions, already weakened during the years of the second intifada, have been undermined further. Palestinian Authority employees have been reduced to welfare recipients. Institutional reform efforts aimed at democratization have been thrown into reverse in order to reassert the office of the president over that of the prime minister. The focus of EU policies after 2000 had been to curtail the powers of the president (Yasser Arafat at the time), by introducing the office of a prime minister, establishing financial transparency, streamlining all revenues to a single account overseen by the Finance Ministry, and unifying most security services under the Interior Ministry. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb>

Now, with Hamas controlling the prime minister's office a second time, the EU seeks to strengthen Abbas by way of direct cooperation and assistance, thereby reversing previous reforms and devaluing the Palestinian Constitution.

Moreover, the EU has undermined its proclaimed aim of peaceful conflict settlement among Palestinians. Followers of Abbas' Fatah movement have interpreted the West's stance as tacit encouragement to hover in the wings in the hope of retaking power upon an early collapse of the Hamas government. Such an interpretation - not entirely misconstrued - has discouraged Fatah from transforming itself into an effective and democratic opposition and from pursuing urgently needed internal reform. Some Fatah elements have understood the West's position to include supporting their regaining power by force if need be, an attitude further hardened by recent arms shipments and military training for Abbas' forces. Within Hamas, rather than strengthening the moderate trend, the Western policy of isolation helped increase the influence of Iran, Syria and the exiled Hamas leadership as the government has had to look for allies and alternative sources of funding. An unprecedented escalation in intra-Palestinian violence was the consequence.

In short, the European isolation-cum-relief approach failed to advance peace efforts. Europeans should concentrate above all on getting Palestinians and Israelis back to the negotiating table, the only way to strengthen Abbas effectively. At the same time, Europeans should urgently return to state building in order to avoid further anarchy and penetration by jihadists. This, however, is impossible while circumventing the Palestinian government and undermining its institutions.

If a Hamas-Fatah unity government is formed, as the recent Mecca agreement intends, the EU should therefore work with it if it adopts "a platform reflecting the Quartet principles" as stated in the EU January 2007 Council Conclusions. If such a government fails, a dialogue with Hamas will be needed more than ever to find common ground and reasonably apply the Quartet criteria.

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