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Hamas members celebrate in August in the Jabalyia refugee camp after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. Some think that defining disengagement as a victory for Hamas helped in the recent elections.

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## ***Will Dempster: After Hamas, is it still possible to be pro-peace?***

**By: Will Dempster**

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The morning after Hamas registered a landslide victory in last week's Palestinian Legislative Council election, I began to consider whether it was possible that the peaceful reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, to which I had dedicated my writing and activism over the past five years, was as naive as my detractors contended. Perhaps, I thought rashly, the popular ascendance of an Islamist and terrorist organization to political power in Palestine made it impossible to continue being an outspoken advocate of peace.

And then I thought about a young woman I once met during a town hall meeting in Bethlehem. After a young human rights attorney extolled the virtues of perpetuating armed conflict with Israel in a 10-minute tirade during the event, the woman - wearing a green hijab - threw the room into thunderous applause after excoriating the attorney for always blaming others for his problems and not doing anything to make things better himself through non-violent action.

And then I thought about Mazen, a young Palestinian journalist whose close friend was shot and killed by an Israeli soldier on a documentary shoot in the West Bank. Despite all he has to be angry about, Mazen still remains a committed activist against his community's most violent and extreme elements.

And then I thought about Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who only year ago was elected in an overwhelming vote while articulating the most progressive diplomatic platform in Palestinian history.

And then I realized that, like most things in the study of the Middle East, reality is significantly more complex than media sound bites.

Although it is tempting to view Hamas' election in a vacuum absent any historical context, any casual observer of Palestinian politics knew that a revolution was brewing. After decades of utter dominance of the Palestinian national movement, Fatah - the movement founded by the late Yasser Arafat - had rotted at its foundation. Wracked by corruption, Fatah failed spectacularly at providing the social services, security and diplomatic progress it promised Palestinians after signing the Oslo Accords in 1993.

The Palestinian public's discontent with Fatah swelled further after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. Armed militias - not the PA security forces - ruled the streets. Anarchy prevailed, and the PA did nothing to stop it. To many Palestinians and observers, Abbas appeared either to lack the will or ability to contain the lawlessness. Palestinians had had enough.

Hamas - the physical incarnation of evil to Israelis and Westerners - fed off this discontent spectacularly. After a decade of catering to the most destitute Palestinians with a variety of services the PA failed to provide, Hamas had deeply engrained itself in Palestinian society. Because Hamas enjoyed such widespread support on the Palestinian street for its benevolence in the social sector - and at least a subtle admiration for its resistance to the Israeli occupation - it was able to use the first Palestinian elections in 10 years to completely upend the status quo.

Despite any rational reasons guiding its rise to political power, neither Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert nor any other Israeli leader should engage Hamas politically until it ceases the barbaric practice of suicide bombings and recognizes Israel's right to exist. That said, it is so important that Israel and its allies not use this development as an excuse to completely ignore Palestinians.

While it is an important part of its ideology, Palestinians voted for Hamas not simply because it desires Israel's destruction. Rather, they did so as a manner to depose a corrupt and ineffective government. Polls still consistently indicate a large majority of Palestinians desire a two-state solution. And if the violent riots raging throughout the West Bank and Gaza are any indication, large numbers of Fatah activists and other Palestinians are angered and embarrassed by Hamas' victory.

Although the reasons for Hamas' electoral success are more complex than some believe, even the most outspoken peace activists must realize that the Oslo process - which had been decomposing slowly since the outbreak of the second intifada - is dead. So too perhaps is the land-for-peace paradigm. Not dead, however, are the nearly 12 million Israelis and Palestinians that inhabit the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Because they share such a small portion of the Earth, it is impossible for one's destiny to be decided without input from the other. And while at this moment peace appears more elusive than ever, I take comfort in the old Zionist adage "if you will it, it is no dream."

*-The writer, a senior majoring in international affairs, is The Hatchet's senior editor.*

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