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Is Hamas Ready to Deal?

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Alex Nabaum

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WHATEVER the endgame between Israel, Hezbollah and Hamas, one thing is certain: Israel's hopes of ensuring its security by walling itself off from resentful neighbors are dead. One lesson from Israel's assault on Lebanon and its military operation in Gaza is that the missiles blow

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We can hope that multinational cooperation will help to secure Israel's border with Lebanon. But what about the Palestinian issue, which has been seemingly pushed to the back burner by the war in Lebanon?

A bold gesture now by Israel would surprise its adversaries, convey strength, and even catch domestic political opposition off guard. And as strange as it may seem, were the United States able to help Israel help Hamas, it might turn the rising tide of global Muslim resentment.

Recent discussions I've had with Hamas leaders and their supporters around the globe indicate that Israel might just find a reasonable and influential bargaining partner.

Hamas's top elected official, Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, now accepts that to stop his people's suffering, his government must forsake its all-or-nothing call for Israel's destruction. "We have no problem with a sovereign Palestinian state over all our lands within the 1967 borders, living in calm," Mr. Haniya told me in his Gaza City office in late June, shortly before an Israeli missile destroyed it. "But we need the West as a partner to help us through."

Mr. Haniya's government had just agreed to a historic compromise with Fatah and its leader, President Mahmoud Abbas, forming a national coalition that implicitly accepts the coexistence alongside Israel. But this breakthrough was quickly overshadowed by Israel's offensive into Gaza in retaliation for the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, Cpl. Gilad Shalit, by Palestinian militants, including members of Hamas's military wing.

Many Israelis consider the rescue of a soldier a "sacred value," worth almost any cost, including military action leading to other Israeli soldiers dying. But the Israeli offensive also had a larger strategic goal: to destroy whatever potential the Hamas government had to prevent Israel from unilaterally redrawing its boundaries to include some West Bank settlements. Doing so was something that Israel had intended as soon as it could convince the United States that with Hamas having defeated Fatah at the polls, there was no legitimate Palestinian partner to negotiate with.

Khaled Meshal, the Damascus-based head of the Hamas politburo, refused to release Corporal Shalit unless Israel freed hundreds of prisoners. While it is true that Israel has shown willingness to release hundreds of Palestinian detainees in return for a single Israeli in the past, Mr. Meshal's stand might have been part of a larger political game.

As a senior adviser to President Abbas told me of Mr. Meshal: "He has tried to undermine

the Haniya government's authority by presenting himself as Hamas's true decision maker, and he will not be remembered as the person who legitimized Israel and sacrificed sacred land."

Prime Minister Haniya and many of Hamas's other Sunni leaders are known to be uncomfortable with the loose coalition that Mr. Meshal has been forging with Shiite Iran and Hezbollah. Hasan Yusuf, a Hamas official held in Israel's Ketzioth prison, doesn't think President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran's declaration that the main solution to the Middle East crisis is for the elimination of the "Zionist regime" is practical or wise. "The outcome in Lebanon doesn't change our view," Mr. Yusuf informed me last weekend. "We believe in two states living side by side."

He also said that "all Hamas factions have agreed to a unilateral cease-fire, including halting Qassam rockets; the movement is ready to go farther if it receives any encouraging responses from Israel and the West."

But even moderate Hamas figures feel that as long as Israel, the United States and Europe boycott the elected government in Gaza and the West Bank, there is little choice but to accept whatever help comes along.

This is doubly unfortunate. While Mr. Meshal says Islam allows only a long-term truce with Israel, Hamas officials closer to Prime Minister Haniya believe that a formal peace deal is possible, especially if negotiations can begin out of the spotlight and proceed by degrees.

"You can't expect us to take off all of our clothes at once," one Hamas leader told me, "or we'll be naked in the cold, like Arafat in his last years." This official said that if Hamas moved too fast, it would alienate its base, but if his government continued to be isolated, the base would radicalize. "Either way, you could wind up with a bunch of little Al Qaedas."

Although Prime Minister Haniya has more popular support, Mr. Meshal controls the militias and the money. If financing — perhaps from moderate Arab states — could be channeled to Mr. Haniya's government for social services like salaries, fuel, food, building repairs, garbage collection and so forth, then Mr. Meshal's (mostly Iranian) bankroll would be less of a factor, and popular pressure could help rein in Hamas's military wing.

Prime Minister Haniya's position comes down to this: "We need you, as you need us." For the United States and Europe, the stakes are also high. Mr. Haniya wants Americans and Europeans to recognize that the region has welcomed Hamas's election to power as a genuine exercise in democracy.

If America were to engage his government, he believes, it would be the West's best opportunity to reverse its steep decline in the esteem of Arabs and Muslims everywhere. "We need a dialogue of civilizations," he said, "not a clash of civilizations."

A survey by the Pew Center's Global Attitudes Project released in June found that Muslim opinions about the West had worsened drastically over the past year.

This month President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, warned that continued Middle East hostilities involving Israel "will radicalize the Muslim world, even those of us who are moderate today. From there, it will be just one step away to that ultimate nightmare: a clash of civilizations."

But Khurshid Ahmad, a senator in Pakistan and leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the world's oldest and most important Islamist movements, recently told me that if Hamas accepted a two-state solution, "with both Palestine and Israel having full economic, political and military sovereignty over their pre-1967 territories, and with Palestinians allowed into Palestine and Jews into Israel, then I would recommend this solution to the entire Muslim community."

Tangible results, like prisoner exchanges, are important. However, so are symbolic actions. Hamas officials have stressed the importance of Israel's recognizing their suffering from the original loss of Palestinian land. And survey research of Palestinian refugees and Hamas by my colleagues and I, supported by the National Science Foundation, reliably finds that violent opposition to peace decreases if the adversary is seen to compromise its own moral position, even if the compromise has no material value.

"Israel freeing some of our prisoners will help us to stop others from attacking it," said the Hamas government spokesman, Ghazi Hamad. "But Israel must apologize for our tragedy in 1948 before we can talk about negotiating over our right of return to historic Palestine."

As the Pew survey made clear, the Israel-Palestinian issue has become the principal fault line in world conflict. There would be some sad satisfaction if the bloodshed in Gaza and at the Lebanon border served as a starting point for bringing the larger conflict to an end.

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