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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Hamas May Give Peace a Chance

By SCOTT ATRAN

Ramallah, West Bank — TWO unlikely factors - the maneuverings of Hamas, a group the United States considers a chief sponsor of terrorism, and a widespread fear of chaos among Palestinians - are combining to create some hope in the runup to next month's election to choose Yasir Arafat's successor as head of the Palestinian Authority.

The best news is that Mahmoud Abbas, Mr. Arafat's successor as leader of the Fatah faction, has emerged as the candidate favored not only by Israel and the United States, but also by the European Union and, most surprisingly, by Hamas. On Tuesday, Mr. Abbas (who is also known as Abu Mazen) called for an end to the four-year-old intifada, saying that the "the use of weapons is harmful and it should stop."

Hamas leaders, who would be expected to fight against any such compromise, actually worked behind the scenes to undermine the candidacy of Mr. Abbas's main rival, Marwan Barghouti, the jailed intifada leader who is a beacon to the younger generation of Fatah militants. He withdrew from the race on Sunday.

Although Mr. Barghouti is in spirit closer than Mr. Abbas to Hamas, the group's leaders decided that his candidacy was interfering with formation of a Palestinian political consensus and could have led to political anarchy. The fact is, with the intifada bearing little fruit in terms of Israeli concessions, Hamas is now embroiled in infighting. Its West Bank leaders are leaning toward historic compromise, while its Gaza militants want to step up violence.

As Mr. Arafat lay dying, the principal leaders agreed to jettison their longstanding refusal to cooperate with any government that was involved with the 1993 Oslo peace accords. Most significant, the top Hamas leader on the West Bank, Sheik Hassan Yusef, declared that the group should consider an indefinite "hudna" - or pause in armed conflict - if Israel were to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders, approve a right of return for Palestinian refugees, release long-term prisoners and raze the wall being built in the West Bank.

While these conditions are of course unacceptable to Israel, the fact that a hudna was offered at all was remarkable. Mr. Yusef, who was released in November after more than two years in an Israeli prison, insisted that he was simply reiterating positions stated in the past by Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the Hamas founder who was assassinated by Israel in March. But this may be semantic sleight-of-hand: Mr. Yusef told me last week that "hudna" clearly meant that both sides in the lifelong conflict could live in safety and peace as long as it lasts, and that it could even be extended indefinitely. "We can dream about all Palestine being Muslim - like some Israelis dream of a Greater Israel that includes all our lands - but it is not practical," he said.

Of course, Mr. Yusef faces opposition from within. Mahmoud Zahar, a senior Hamas official in Gaza, dismissed the overture, saying that there would be "no talk about a hudna now" and that his group's "strategy is to liberate all of Palestine." Soon enough, Hamas bombs killed five Israeli soldiers in Gaza; that was followed by Israeli Army raids that killed several Palestinians.

But the Gaza faction may be on the wrong side of history. A poll this month by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research showed Fatah gaining popular support in Gaza and the West Bank - its favorable rating increased to 40 percent from 30 percent in the last poll, in September - while Hamas's favorable rating fell to 20 percent from about 30 percent. A survey by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center found that for the first time since the outbreak of the current intifada in 2000, a majority of Palestinians rejected military operations and expressed optimism about the future.

Mr. Yusef seems to represent a chance that Hamas may enter the political mainstream. "We must take responsibility, along with Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority, in taking care of our people," he told me. "And that means we must also negotiate with the Israelis." Israeli and Palestinian intelligence sources have informed me that this sentiment has received strong backing from Hamas prisoners in Israel, as well as from Khalid Meshal, an influential Hamas leader who lives in Damascus.

Isaac Ben Israel, an Israeli Air Force general and leading military strategist, told me that he thinks Mr. Yusef may be signaling a sincere shift in Hamas that Israel could live with. Of course, he stressed that Hamas first had to be severely weakened by the targeted assassinations of its leaders, which has helped bring suicide bombings down to pre-intifada levels. "Paradoxical as it sounds," he said, "attacking Hamas has helped the moderate Palestinian forces."

In the end, it seems clear that Hamas is worn out and so perhaps ready to stop fighting - just like most Palestinians. According to Palestinian Authority figures, 63 percent of households saw their income cut at least in half during the intifada, and 58 percent now live in poverty.

In addition, the human cost of war comes to bear even on militants. I spoke with Mr. Yusef about interviews I did with the parents of suicide bombers, all of whom said they would have done anything to stop their children if they had known of their plans. "Suffering and humiliation make it understandable, even animals defend themselves to the death," he told me. "But God created people to live, not to die. We have to find an exit. We need a dialogue of civilizations, not a clash of civilizations." And he emphasized

his belief that Hamas can bring along other Islamic groups "to create a stable international order."

The main problem is that each side demands that the other announce a truce first. "If I advocated a unilateral cease-fire - proclaiming that we will not attack Israelis if Israelis do not attack us - then my political influence would end," he said. And Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is just as much a captive to politics - he too would not survive in his own party if he unilaterally declared a cease-fire.

How to break the stalemate? The United States and Europe, working in tandem with Israel and the Palestinian leaders, could perhaps broker a mutually declared cease-fire, a first step toward indefinite hudna and Mr. Yusef's "dialogue of civilizations." A tall order, indeed, but at least it now seems that Hamas is willing to listen, and wants to give democracy a chance.

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