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Sacred values

If the Middle East peace process is to be salvaged, Israelis and Palestinians must make symbolic concessions. But time is running out.

By Scott Atran

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Hamas leader and Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya seems to understand that to stop his people's suffering, his government must forsake his party's all-or-nothing call for Israel's destruction. "We have no problem with a sovereign Palestinian state over all our lands within the '67 borders, living in calm," Haniya told me in his Gaza City office in late June, shortly before it was destroyed in an Israeli missile attack, "but we need the West as a partner to help us through." Haniya's government recently agreed to a historic compromise with rival Fatah leader, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, to form a national coalition that implicitly allows for the coexistence of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, following the 1967 borders. But news of this breakthrough was quickly superseded by Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip in retaliation for the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian militants, including members of Hamas's military wing.

Many Israelis consider the rescue of a captured soldier as a "sacred value" to be achieved at any cost, but the underlying strategic goal is to destroy whatever potential the Hamas government has to block Israel from unilaterally redrawing its international boundaries--a move Israel intends to undertake as soon as it can convince the United States that there is no Palestinian partner to negotiate with. Despite Israel's massive response, Khaled Meshaal, the Damascus-based head of the Hamas political bureau, refused the soldier's release unless Israel also freed hundreds of prisoners. Meshaal undoubtedly intended to leverage Israel's sacred value; in the past, Israel has been willing to compensate enemies like Hezbollah with the release of hundreds of Palestinian detainees in return for a single Israeli.

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But according to one of Abbas's senior advisers, Meshaal has other mundane concerns: "He has repeatedly tried to undermine the Haniya government's authority to negotiate 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."

Haniya's more moderate pitch to Western governments comes down to "we need you, as you need us." He has asked that Americans and Europeans end their sanctions against his government and recognize that the Arab and Muslim world see Hamas's election to power as a genuine exercise in democracy. Engaging his government, Haniya says, would be the best opportunity for the Bush administration to reverse the steep decline of the United States in the esteem of Arabs and Muslims everywhere.

Indeed, in a June survey by the Pew Center's Global Attitudes Project, Muslim opinions about the West worsened over the past year by overwhelming margins, and many commentators, including former Republican Sen. John Danforth and former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, believe that a "dialogue of civilizations" is pressing. Khurshid Ahmad, a senator in Pakistan and the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the world's oldest and most important Islamist movements, concurs. In Islamabad, he recently told me that if the Hamas government accepts 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 Ummah [community]." Given prevailing stereotypes, this is a remarkable statement by a self-proclaimed "Islamic fundamentalist" who considers such a solution key to bridging and narrowing the otherwise widening gulf between Muslim and Western societies and to marginalizing Al Qaeda.

For their part, Israeli officials acknowledge that the Hamas-Fatah accord is a positive trend, but do not see it as a turning point. "We have no reason to trust Hamas," says Isaac Ben Israel, one of Israel's top military strategists who currently heads the country's space agency. "And if they persist in attacking us across the Green Line we will physically destroy their government and make those [who] elected them pay the price." Ben Israel, like other officials I spoke with, does not make any strategic distinction between moderate and hardline Hamas factions.

To change its policy, Israel requires practical steps from Hamas, such as abandoning all attacks on its territory and renouncing its own sacred values-- notably the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to go back to former homes within Israel. Hamas government spokesman Ghazi Hamad also speaks of good-faith gestures, observing that "Israel releasing some of our prisoners may help us to try to stop others from attacking it."

Such symbolic concessions might ultimately prove more important than material trade-offs in making peace. Unfortunately, time is running out for talking or even thinking about these broader issues: Israel, the United States, and Europe will not end their isolation of the Hamas government unless it formally recognizes Israel's legitimacy and clamps down on Palestinian militants. But even Palestinians acknowledge that Hamas's Damascus-based political bureau has more sway over Hamas's military wing than does the Haniya government, thus potentially undermining any possible conciliatory government gestures. Meshaal has emerged the winner in past clashes with Haniya. Both, for instance, initially agreed that Hamas would participate in the 1995 Palestinian legislative elections, but Meshaal changed his mind at the last minute and threatened to cut off Haniya



and other candidates from Hamas if they ran. Haniya withdrew his candidacy and left Hamas. It was only after Israel's 1997 release of Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, in exchange for two Mossad agents caught in a botched attempt to poison Meshaal in Jordan, that Haniya became Yassin's bureau chief and rejoined Hamas.

Moreover, Meshaal, who receives protection from Damascus and who has been courting Iran for money, can also count on Lebanon's Hezbollah for support. Hezbollah's cross-border raid that captured two Israeli soldiers strikingly resembled the earlier attack by Palestinian militants that captured Israel's Cpl. Gilad Shalit. Israel now aims to reestablish the country's security and military credibility on both the Gaza and Lebanese fronts. But from a strategic perspective, Hezbollah represents a clearer target than Hamas--other than Syria, Sunni Arab countries have no love for Shiite Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors--and this may actually relieve some of Israel's pressure on Hamas.

Although Haniya and many other local Hamas leaders are not altogether happy with the loose coalition that Meshaal has been forging with Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, they say that as long as Israel, the United States, and Europe continue to isolate and starve the Hamas government there is little choice but to accept whatever help comes their way.

At present, Haniya has one advantage: He is Palestine's most popular man. Fatah leaders credit him with shrewdly managing the Hamas election campaign, which emphasized honest government on the model of Hamas's well-run social services in contrast to Fatah's corruption and minimized calls for Israel's destruction. Avi Dichter, Israel's minister in charge of internal security who is currently engaged in informal talks with Hamas, describes Haniya as "likable" and willing to negotiate. And Haniya is now becoming beloved by the people in the same way that Yasir Arafat was because he is the only leader who has come out of hiding to visit families stricken by the Israeli offensive, often arriving at the same time as the ambulances and aid workers any time of day or night.

In the eyes of some, though, Haniya's popularity comes back to bite him. When Haniya laments that Gaza is out of control and that he can do little to stop the mess, Israeli strategists like Ben Israel point out that Haniya, who received almost 70 percent of the vote in Gaza, has the popular backing to challenge the hardline exile-leadership in Damascus. But since he can't--or won't--Haniya's popularity is seen as an obstacle to an agreement, just as it was with Arafat.

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