

## U.S. needs new course in regard to Hamas

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It has become an article of faith among observers of U.S. foreign affairs that the Bush administration has not used diplomacy adequately in the Middle East, especially in regard to the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Criticism only intensified after Hamas' recent military victory in the Gaza Strip over its rival, Fatah. Few, however, noted the victory illustrated U.S. diplomacy's limitations and unintended consequences.

Over the past six years, the Bush administration has devoted a surprising amount of diplomatic resources to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In 2002, George W. Bush became the first U.S. president to openly call for the creation of an independent Palestinian state. He backed Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, which created the first region under full Palestinian control. His administration also encouraged the Palestinians to strengthen the authority of their prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas. Washington subsequently supported Palestinian legislative elections, since they offered Abbas and his allies in Fatah an opportunity to legitimize their power at the expense of Hamas. Fatah won U.S. support because it is committed to the "two-state solution," in which an independent Palestinian state would exist alongside Israel.

### Regional allies could help

When Hamas won elections and control over the Palestinian government, the U.S. and other Western governments imposed sanctions and cut foreign aid to the Palestinian government because Hamas is not committed to the "two-state solution" and has attacked Israel with rockets and terrorism. Western policies were intended to force Hamas to accept Israel's existence or to force the Palestinians to withdraw their support from their newly elected government.

This policy now lies in tatters. Hamas, empowered by the election and worried Fatah would recover with U.S. support, seized control of the Gaza Strip. There are now two Palestinian entities: Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. At this point, Israel has no desire to reoccupy the Gaza Strip, and Washington is preoccupied with the war in Iraq.

Nonetheless, U.S. policies did not adjust to the new situation. Washington recently announced yet new measures to strengthen Fatah and to isolate Hamas.

A more realistic approach would be to recognize that direct U.S. opposition to Hamas has been a disastrous failure and requires a new course. With the help of Egypt and other regional allies, Washington could develop a mechanism by which Hamas could participate in Palestinian domestic politics without directly threatening Israel. Note that Hamas has offered truces to Israel, whose elimination nonetheless remains a long-term objective. Hamas is far more interested in gaining power in the Palestinian territories, so that it can implement its Islamic agenda.

It is worth remembering that Washington classified Fatah as a terrorist group until the Oslo accords in 1993. Fatah then recognized Israel and was allowed to establish a state. Today, Fatah is a U.S. ally. Middle Eastern politics is a slippery slope down which many a Western politician has fallen, but is it too much to hope Hamas might eventually follow the same path as Fatah?