

Give hudna a chance: An obligation to find a lasting peace

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

Election season 2006 is over, and we can say goodbye to the negative media ads and stories. Opposing sides fought one another with reckless abandon. Yet they never once thought of turning their struggle into a civil war. So why is the Bush administration claiming that it's pushing for democracy in the Middle East while it is taking steps that encourage a civil war between Hamas and Fatah?

In their January 2006 elections, the Palestinians emerged as a potential democracy—limited, to be sure, by the absence of sovereignty and by uncertain borders and a destitute economy under Israeli control. Hamas won the internationally monitored election. There was just one problem. As far as Israel and the United States were concerned, Palestinian voters chose the wrong party.

After a little international arm-twisting, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations agreed with the U.S., the fourth member of this quartet, that a democratic election that “went wrong” could not stand. Like a bunch of bankers foreclosing on farms during the Great Depression, the quartet and Israel cut off funds to the new government.

This is not the way democracy is supposed to work. Which raises the question: Do the U.S. and Israel really want to create indigenous democracies in the Middle East? Or do they want to create a “Syriana”—a term from the 2005 movie of that name that suggests a U.S. goal of re-creating an ancient Syria (made up of present-day Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria) as an “Americana,” or U.S. empire? If this is not the goal of the U.S. and Israel (with acquiescence from other members of the quartet), why has so little been done to encourage a peaceful accord between Hamas and Fatah, the opposing parties struggling to find their footing in the fledgling Palestinian democracy?

The Palestinian population is suffering from a severe food shortage. Border blockades interrupt food distribution, leaving food to rot in the fields or to be tossed

into the sea. Medical and educational facilities are severely undermined by the financial boycott. The Gaza Strip is virtually closed off. Salaries for 170,000 Palestinian Authority employees have been paid in only two out of the past seven months.

Under pressure from the financial blockade, Hamas sent word to President Mahmoud Abbas that it would sacrifice some of the power it gained in a democratic election to form a unity government. But the U.S. and Israel do not act as if they favor peaceful negotiations. Their goal appears to be not the inclusion of Hamas, but its exclusion. A Hamas-run Palestinian government does not fit the Syria mold.

When outsiders choose sides in a civil war, their positions reflect what is best for them. So it is no surprise that the U.S. is moving to expand Abbas's Fatah presidential guard from 3,500 to 6,000. The *New York Times* reports that this is part of a \$26 million plan to "reduce the security chaos in the Palestinian Authority."

Meanwhile, the newspaper *Ha'aretz* says that the Bush administration dispatched General Keith Dayton, American security coordinator in the Palestinian territories, to London to report to the Road Map Quartet on the U.S. plan to arm and train the forces of Abbas "for a potential violent confrontation with Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip."

On hand for the briefing were key administration officials David Welch and Elliott Abrams. Welch is assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. Abrams, a well-known figure in the Reagan administration, oversees Middle East policy for the National Security Council. Since his conviction on charges related to the Iran-contra scandal (he was later pardoned), Abrams has emerged as a strong pro-Israel neoconservative leader.

A solution for a peaceful resolution is at hand if the Bush administration and Israel would respond to the Hamas proposal for a "long-term truce during which the Israeli and Palestinian peoples can try to negotiate a lasting peace."

Ahmed Yousef, a senior adviser to Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniya, explained the meaning of such a truce (*hudna* in Arabic) in the *New York Times*:

Typically covering ten years, a *hudna* is recognized in Islamic jurisprudence as a legitimate and binding contract. A *hudna* extends beyond the Western concept of a cease-fire and obliges the parties to use

the period to seek a permanent, nonviolent resolution to their differences.

A concept that is derived from the Qur'an, writes Yousef, would be honored by Hamas as far preferable to military conflict because "war dehumanizes the enemy and makes it easier to kill," while a *hudna* "affords the opportunity to humanize one's opponents and understand their position with the goal of resolving the intertribal or international dispute."

Will the U.S. and Israel listen? Or will they ignore the offer and press for a Palestinian civil war as the next step on the road to Syria?