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Hamas's startling victory

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The Islamist group Hamas has swept to a position of power in the Palestinian elections, winning 76 out of parliament's 132 seats, brushing aside the former ruling party, Fatah. On Thursday, January 26th, the Palestinian Authority cabinet resigned. President Mahmoud Abbas suggested he might step down too



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BELYING fears of violence, Palestinians voted peacefully and numerously for a new parliament on January 25th. While exit polls had pointed to a narrow victory for Fatah, the ruling party in the Palestinian Authority (PA), official results gave its Islamist rival Hamas some 76 seats of the legislature's 132, a comprehensive victory for the movement. Fatah took just 43 seats. The PA cabinet, which has to be reappointed after the election, resigned pre-emptively on Thursday, January 26th.

Turn-out was high at 77% and Hamas won an outright majority of seats. But it is likely to try to avoid a showdown with Fatah, Israel and the rest of the world, even if it takes over the PA. A Hamas leader said that it would not form a government alone, but seek one of national unity with other parties. Mahmoud Abbas, a Fatah man, is likely to remain the Palestinian president (he is elected directly) and so will still get to appoint the new cabinet. However he has said he might resign if he is unable to pursue a peace policy with Israel.

Most Palestinians still prefer compromise with Israel and oppose *sharia* law, thus going against two of Hamas's

core tenets. But the party campaigned mainly on domestic issues such as corruption and welfare, drawing widespread support.

The world is now reacting to the result. American president George Bush appealed to Mr Abbas to remain in office and vowed that his administration would not deal with an armed Palestinian group that advocates Israel's destruction. But he also suggested the result reflected general discontent with the status quo. Israel's foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, urged the European Union not to support "the establishment of a terrorist government". EU leaders earlier urged Hamas to renounce violence and recognise Israel.

Donors must now decide how closely to work with the PA. It needs their help to avert a looming fiscal crisis, bring the security services under a single chain of command, crack down on lawlessness and get development projects going in Gaza. But, despite warnings from both the United States and the European Union that they cannot work with a PA run by Hamas, their relations with one that contains Hamas ministers will probably not change drastically for now.

How Israel's relations with the PA will change is more important and less predictable. This week at the annual Herzliya conference, a gathering for Israeli movers and shakers, the mood was belligerent. This was partly because the participants' list was replete with flinty-eyed generals and senior intelligence types. But it also reflected a wider sense that Israel is living through a dangerous time in the Middle East: a strong showing by the Muslim Brotherhood (Hamas's antecedents) in recent parliamentary elections in Egypt, unstable regimes vulnerable to extremist influence in Syria and Lebanon, the threat of Iran developing nuclear weapons—and now the rise of an Islamist Palestinian party that, despite surprisingly moderate statements from several of its leaders in the run-up to the election, officially still calls for Israel's destruction.

Varying views

The view that Hamas might be persuaded gradually to abandon armed struggle for politics, as Irish Republicans have over the past few years, gets short shrift here. A commoner model is Hizbullah, the Lebanese group which has roles in parliament and government but retains its armed wing—something that would, in Hamas's case, rule out Israel's agreeing to talks with the PA. Uzi Arad, a former senior Mossad man who runs the Herzliya conference, paints an even more apocalyptic picture: Hamas as the Nazi party in the 1930s, democratically brought to power but gradually adopting ever-more repressive, undemocratic policies.

Still, Israeli views vary. Ehud Olmert, the acting prime minister, has asked for two separate sets of proposals on Hamas: one from his more hardline intelligence and defence chiefs, another from the national security adviser, Giora Eiland, who is said to favour seeking out Hamas's moderate elements.

But Israelis are predisposed to pessimism. Mr Olmert surprised no one in Herzliya by hinting that if peace talks fail, Israel would continue the trend begun by his ailing predecessor, Ariel Sharon: unilateral withdrawal from occupied territory to rid itself of responsibility for the Palestinians, while setting whatever borders it sees fit for its own security. More notable was that Amir Peretz, who on his recent election as Labour Party leader said he would rapidly bring about peace through peace talks, this week hinted at the unilateral option too.