

Point of View

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Is US Policy towards Hamas Constraining Israel?

Last week the US House of Representatives approved a bill against the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA). If the bill becomes a law (approved by Senate and signed by the president), it would limit the administration's ability to transfer economic aid to the PA or to conduct direct contacts with its officials. (See: [Congress Resolution H.R.4681 \(5/23/06\)](#)).

The Re'ut Institute contends that although this bill is seemingly compatible with the Israeli policy towards Hamas, US policy may eventually constrain Israel's political flexibility.

What is the Issue?

- Israel and the US have coordinated their policy towards Hamas and jointly lead the international coalition against it.
- Even before the bill was approved, it seemed that **US policy towards Hamas was harsher than Israel's**:
 - **The US has rejected Israeli proposals** to provide aid for Palestinian infrastructure projects and refused to deal with the PA government. (Benn, **Ha'aretz**, 3/23/06);
 - **Unlike the US, Israel is indirectly assisting the PA** by continuing to supply electricity, water and medical services and writing them off from the custom monies it collects on behalf of the PA. (Eldar, **Ha'aretz**, 5/7/06).

Why is this Important? Why Now?

- Israel's objectives are to maintain the international coalition against the PA while preventing a humanitarian crisis in the PA or its collapse altogether.
- However, these two objectives collide and may not be realized **simultaneously**. Although the Quartet is designing an economic mechanism to supply direct aid to the "Palestinian people", if the international coalition will not accommodate its policy Israel may face:
 - **A humanitarian crisis** in Gaza and the West Bank. This was also the main reason for the resignation of the Quartet envoy to the region, James Wolfensohn. (Eldar, **Ha'aretz**, 5/4/06).
 - **A dismantled or anarchy-ridden PA**. Blocking aid undermines the PA's effective control. Hamas leader Khaled Mash'al stated that if Hamas can not protect the Palestinian people – "the PA can go to hell". (**Ha'aretz**, 3/17/06).
- **US policy increases the tension between the two Israeli objectives, since Israel's political flexibility is affected by US political flexibility and maneuverability**. The proposed bill may reduce furthermore this flexibility.

Policy Options

- The coordination between Israeli and American policy towards Hamas may not last in the long run:
 - Unlike the US, Israel cannot afford to "sever all ties" with the PA, due to their multiple interfaces, which include issues such as ecology, health, transportation etc.

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- If Israel does not lead a coherent policy vis-à-vis Hamas, its political flexibility in future contacts with the PA government may be limited by technical decisions made by the American administration and congress.
- The severing of ties between the US and the PA alongside increasing EU involvement, may damage US status as the chief mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, US ability to maintain the international coalition against Hamas or to advance international support for the Convergence Plan may be limited.

For additional sources see the Re'ut Institute website www.reut-institute.org and **the Re'ut Institute website on the Challenge of Dealing with Hamas:** <http://www.reut2006.info/hamas/eng/>.

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