

State of the Union

With Hamas Europe Reaps What It Sowed

By Charles Tannock

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To say that the outcome of the Palestinian elections has presented the European Union with a thorny problem would be an understatement. But the navel-gazing and bewilderment that Hamas's victory has caused in Brussels is more than a little melodramatic. It should not have come as a shock.

The EU's reluctance to confront the rampant venality in Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority -- indeed, the way Brussels tacitly encouraged that corruption, maybe hoping the PA could be bribed into a peace deal -- is largely what has led to this point. The fact that we knew of Arafat's cronyism and still funneled rivers of cash into his pockets makes the EU complicit in this corruption and ultimately also in the election of Hamas.

Hamas surged to power thanks in part to the grievances of Palestinians who saw Fatah leaders grow fatter on donor money -- including 280 million euros a year from Brussels alone -- while their poverty and misery steadily worsened. Hamas successfully filled the void by providing many charitable services and skillfully using the mosque to push its political agenda. Europe is reaping what it sowed.

Palestinian corruption was the elephant in the room at the European Commission. Indeed, when I and other MEPs pushed for a European Parliament investigation into it three years ago, Chris Patten, then the external relations commissioner, memorably told us he needed such an investigation "like a hole in the head." The inquiry resulted in a whitewash and MEPs were never allowed to debate its findings. Chris Patten moved on. Many more Israelis died in suicide bombings.

Some argue that making diplomatic relations and aid conditional on Hamas renouncing violence and recognizing Israel's legitimacy would not achieve the desired effect. They say such tactics might harden Hamas's position and lose the West influence in Palestine. But what

influence did the hundreds of millions of euros Brussels sunk into the PA exactly buy? Did Arafat let up in his terror war or corruption? Fact is, EU money and "good diplomatic contacts" have singularly failed to achieve their aims for the past decade. It's time to try something new.

It is therefore deeply regrettable that Russia, in spite of its own problems with Islamic terrorism, has invited Hamas to Moscow. It is less surprising perhaps that French President Jacques Chirac and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero -- each playing to his domestic gallery -- should endorse this move.

To frame this issue as some kind of terrible moral dilemma is absurd. Of course, we all want peace in the Middle East. Ordinary Israelis and Palestinians want it even more. But to accept Hamas as a legitimate negotiating partner would be to store up still more trouble for the future. I am as appalled as anyone at the poverty and hopelessness that characterizes the lives of so many Palestinians. As a matter of fact, in electing Hamas Palestinians have given vent in part to their own disgust. But if we sent so much as a penny to a PA led by an unreformed Hamas, we would be showing that we have learned absolutely nothing from our mistakes.

We should not kid ourselves that we owe it to the Palestinians to engage with Hamas just because of a democratic election. If Hamas were a political party in the EU, it would have been outlawed years ago. In its charter, Hamas calls for a global jihad -- like the suicide bombings last year in London, the city I represent. Hamas is not committed to democracy and human rights but to a theocracy under Shariah law.

What we do owe to the Palestinian people, though, is to tell them clearly that while we stand by them in their legitimate quest for statehood, we won't tolerate such a state being run by an Islamist terror regime.

Mr. Tannock is conservative foreign affairs spokesman in the European Parliament.