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How to Treat the Dalai Lama: What China Could Learn from Israel

Paul V.M. Flesher

Tibet is again in the news. Following internal demonstrations against Chinese rule of Tibet that began in March, Chinese forces arrested hundreds of Tibetans, expelled all foreign journalists, and closed the borders.

In response, pro-Tibetan protestors have disrupted Olympic Torch parades in Paris and San Francisco as the torch processes from Greece to China for the Summer Olympics. While Tibetan exiles blame politically repressive and economically unsuccessful Chinese policies, the Chinese government itself blames the Dalai Lama, the 72-year-old monk who leads the Tibetan government-in-exile.

China occupied Tibet in 1951 and after a brutal crackdown in 1959 the Dalai Lama fled to India. Setting up a government in exile, the Dalai Lama called for Tibetan independence from China and has worked tirelessly since then to bring this about. Although the Dalai Lama's calm demeanor and non-violent approach have earned him world-wide acclaim and a Nobel Peace Prize, no world body argued Tibet's cause to the Chinese. Realizing this, the Dalai Lama recently has promoted Tibetan autonomy under Chinese rule, rather than independence, and sought negotiations with China.

Despite this moderation, China continues to vilify the Dalai Lama. Just last week, Chinese President Hu Jintao laid the blame for the troubles at the Dalai Lama's feet, despite the Lama's insistence that he has had nothing to do with the disruptions. Hu said, "No responsible government will sit idle for such crimes [of the Dalai Lama], which gravely encroach human rights, gravely disrupt social order and gravely jeopardize the life and property security of the masses." Hu rebuffed calls from Western governments to negotiate with the Dalai Lama, claiming that these actions show the Lama does not want to talk.

The Dalai Lama may be China's last best opportunity to resolve its Tibetan problem, one that it should take while he lives. Otherwise the situation may deteriorate drastically.

Hu's attitude toward the Dalai Lama is much like recent Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's attitude toward the now-deceased Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Arafat, like the Dalai Lama, spent much of his life outside his homeland, in his case, the Palestinian Territories. In the 1960s, Arafat led first Fatah and then the Palestinian Liberation Organization in terrorist attempts to free his

people. These failed and Arafat became known as an uncompromising enemy of Israel.

By 1988, however, Arafat moderated his stance and moved to negotiation. He was allowed to enter the Territories after agreeing to the Oslo Accords in 1994, became president, and began to work by peaceful means toward an independent Palestinian state. Although younger Palestinians had become radicalized under decades of Israeli occupation, the now-moderate Arafat aimed to use his symbolic stature to bring them toward peace.

When Ariel Sharon became president, he saw Arafat's symbolic reputation as a threat and worked to eliminate it. Refusing negotiations, Sharon used the Israeli army to destroy the apparatus of Palestinian government, ultimately demolished the Palestinian capital, Ramallah, and besieged Arafat in his own office for two years, ending in his death. The last powerful Palestinian moderate had died.

Palestine's radical younger generation elected the Islamist Hamas party, which kicked the remains of Arafat's party out of the Gaza Strip, thereby eliminating any effective Palestinian government. Although peace negotiations are now underway, the absence of Hamas representatives makes a final settlement impossible. The radical Palestinians simply will not agree.

The Dalai Lama stands in a position similar to that of Arafat in the last years of his life. Starting from a much less radical position as Arafat (the Dalai Lama has never been a terrorist), he has moderated his position over the decades of Chinese occupation of Tibet. He now seeks a middle way of negotiated autonomy rather than independence. He hopes his powerful symbolic leadership can bring his people to agree to any reasonable settlement that might be worked out.

However, it is already clear that younger Tibetans, both in exile and in Tibet itself, have become radicalized. Many see the Dalai Lama's strategy as ineffective and embrace violent means. They will not serve as a negotiating partner once the Dalai Lama passes from the scene. Instead, they will likely destabilize Tibet further and cause the Chinese military to crack down even harder.

For the sake of Tibet's future and China's future as its rulers, China should negotiate with the Dalai Lama while there is still time.