The United States and Israel are adamant that Hamas’ political aspirations must come after unilateral and, if need be, coercive disarmament of the resistance group. Disarmament may develop into the number-one precondition needed before elections can transpire. This is due, in part, to the prevailing US belief that resistance movements cannot have both military and political power. But this unilateralist interpretation of political progress in a region that has a history of protracted conflict is both unfortunate and potentially destructive. Instead, what is needed is a process of gradualism – where the political aspirations of militant groups are recognized and weapons are not forcibly removed by outsiders.

There are many precedents of conducting negotiations prior to disarmament. This occurred in South Africa with the African National Congress (ANC) and in El Salvador with the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN). In neither case was disarmament a requirement for engagement in a political process; moreover, in both cases disarmament and reintegrating into reconstituted security forces was a pre-condition for all parties engaged in the conflict – and did not apply only to resistance groups. In each of these cases, the leaders of both groups, the ANC and the FALN, noted that disarmament could not be enforced, as members feared for their and their family’s safety.

Using these historical instances as a guidepost, it is possible to draw this general rule: if parties in a protracted conflict are asked to disarm, the willingness to disarm must appear more attractive than the continuation of conflict. The Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) recently demonstrated its desire to ease hostilities through a hudna or ceasefire. However, skirmishes have broken out since the announcement of the hudna, as an absence of trust and a prevailing sense of suspicion has undermined the environment necessary to confidence building. As a result, the insistence on disarmament is even a bigger obstacle for Hamas to meet. Put simply, promoting a politically rational policy to deal with politically motivated violence is only acceptable when setting your sites on a coherent political
It is often easier to prescribe a solution which will “fix” a situation than it is to imagine yourself as a member of a disenfranchised, isolated and stateless group that has been asked to give up their one means of protection. Groups that have been in conflict and trauma cannot simply abandon self-defense. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are vital psychological and historical obstacles to overcome before a political settlement can be reached – and before militant groups agree to disarm. Additionally, disarmament is often the most contentious element of any peace agreement and therefore, matters of disarmament are often not discussed in the first stage of a peace settlement. Insisting on disarmament prior to the beginning of peace negotiations is often a prescription for failure.

In protracted, low-intensity conflicts – as seen in apartheid South Africa as well as in present-day, Israel and Palestine – distrust is born out of decades of psychological damage. This damage is sustained and exacerbated by the isolation, humiliation and demonization of the “other” by the powerful. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this has led to an attempt to balance asymmetrical power through asymmetrical violence. This said, and in spite of decades of trauma and psychological damage suffered by residents in the Occupied Territories there is real hope for uncorrupt, democratic governance to take the place. Hamas continues to participate in the political sphere and has been widely supported by Palestinians during the municipal elections. Polls show that Hamas would have been successful if the national legislative elections were allowed to take place on June 17.

Similar to the Lebanese group Hizbullah, Hamas’s role in Palestine is two-fold. First, it provides free social services such as housing, food, health care and schooling to those in need. Second, it is an armed resistance movement. Certainly, there is a real need to resolve these two distinct variables in the future, although the continued presence of weaponry in the Occupied Territories is a symptom of an extreme sense of isolation, frustration and social dislocation. In an emulation of Hizbullah’s politico-military success against Israel, it would not be inaccurate to say that Hamas not only seeks to secure Israel’s respect through military projection but would also like to participate in a democratically-elected, Palestinian National Authority.

Palestinian Foreign Minister, Nasser Al-Qedwa has noted: “Holding and using arms must be organized, and it should not be used for personal purposes or to violate law, order and discipline.” It is also considered to
be legal to hold arms while the occupation lasts. It is likely that several generations will pass before a stable and just peace is achieved in Israel and Palestine. At that point, resistance groups can either demilitarize or become integrated into already existing security forces.

Addressing the root causes of the conflict is needed at this stage before actual demilitarization can take place, and a “political horizon” must be offered to militant groups in order for them to have confidence that a political solution is possible. Equally, at this stage the possibility of Hamas’ disarmament by the United Nations under US and Israeli pressure is seen by Hamas – and its supporters – simply as a step towards legitimizing their demise. Indeed, this disarmament process would inevitably result in a coercive disarmament which has been disastrous in past operations, namely in Somalia and Iraq.

Historically, resistance movements have been reluctant to give up their weapons. This can be seen in Mali where UN-lead disarmament operations in the mid-1990s facilitated the trade of automatic weaponry for shot guns. The UN-Mali initiative was significant: it reduced the scope of widespread slaughter while protecting the cultural importance arms gave males and village elders. Furthermore, the UN initiative permitted the economic necessity of having arms to protect cattle from bandits and predators. The economic and cultural value placed on weaponry is not to be underestimated in Palestine just as it would not be taken for granted in the US.

The postponement of the June 17 elections in Palestine was defended on the grounds of technical concerns over election laws, but in fact was made because the growing popularity of Hamas threatened Fatah’s hold on the Palestinian polity. The postponement was heralded by Hamas as politically unwise, and the announcement cause disquiet in Gaza and several West Bank cities. Although, it is suspected that both the Bush Administration and Ariel Sharon’s government breathed a sigh of relief due over the postponement decision. The failure of the Israeli and American political establishment to understand Hamas’s desire for inclusion may have irreparably harmed any chance for an early resumption of peace talks. Given this, the demand for disarmament of Hamas prior to political dialogue will not only be difficult, it may well be impossible.