

# A setback for the Bush Doctrine in Gaza

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Armed members of Hamas blow up the Palestinian Preventative Security headquarters and intelligence headquarters in Gaza Strip, 14 June 2007. (Hatem Omar/[MaanImages](#))

The dramatic rout of the US and Israeli-backed Palestinian militias in Gaza by forces loyal to Hamas represents a major setback to the Bush doctrine in Palestine.

## Background

Ever since Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in the occupied territories in January 2006, elements of the leadership of the long-dominant Fatah movement, including Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas and his advisors have conspired with Israel, the United States and the intelligence services of several Arab states to overthrow and weaken Hamas. This support has included funneling weapons and tens of millions of dollars to unaccountable militias, particularly the “Preventive Security Force” headed by Gaza warlord Mohammad Dahlan, a close ally of Israel and the United States and the Abbas-affiliated “Presidential Guard.” US Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams — who helped divert money to the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s and who was convicted of lying to Congress in the Iran-Contra scandal — has spearheaded the effort to set up these Palestinian Contras. (This background has been extensively detailed in a number of articles published by The Electronic Intifada in recent months). Abrams is also notorious for helping to cover up massacres and atrocities committed against civilians in El Salvador by US-backed militias and death squads.

Two recent revelations underscore the extent of the conspiracy: on 7 June, *Ha'aretz* reported that “senior Fatah officials in the Gaza Strip have asked Israel to allow them to receive large shipments of arms and ammunition from Arab countries, including Egypt.” According to the Israeli newspaper, Fatah asked Israel for “armored cars, hundreds of armor-piercing RPG rockets, thousands of hand grenades and millions of rounds of ammunition for small caliber weapons,” all to be used against Hamas.

From the moment of its election victory, Hamas acted pragmatically and with the intent to integrate itself into the existing political structure. It had observed for over a year a unilateral ceasefire with Israel and had halted the suicide attacks on Israeli civilians that had made it notorious. In a leaked confidential memo written in May and published by *The Guardian* this week senior UN envoy Alvaro de Soto confirmed that it was under pressure from the United States that Abbas refused Hamas’ initial invitation to form a “national unity government.” De Soto details that Abbas advisers actively aided and abetted the Israeli-US-European Union aid cutoff and siege of the Palestinians under occupation, which led to

massively increased poverty for millions of people. These advisors engaged with the United States in a “plot” to “bring about the untimely demise of the [Palestinian Authority] government led by Hamas,” de Soto wrote.

Despite a bloody attempted coup against Hamas by the Dahlan-led forces in December and January, Hamas still agreed to join a “National Unity Government” with Fatah brokered by Saudi Arabia at the Mecca summit. Dahlan and Abbas’ advisers were determined to sabotage this, continuing to amass weapons, and refusing to place their militias under the control of a neutral interior minister who eventually resigned in frustration.

## **A setback for United States and Israel**

The core of US strategy in the Southwest and Central Asia, particularly Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon is to establish puppet regimes that will fight America’s enemies on its behalf. This strategy seems to be failing everywhere. The Taliban are resurgent in Afghanistan. Despite its “surge” the US is no closer to putting down the resistance in Iraq and cannot even trust the Iraqi army it helped set up. The Lebanese army, which the US hopes to bolster as a counterweight to Hizballah, has performed poorly against a few hundred foreign fighters holed up in Nahr al-Bared refugee camp (although it has caused death and devastation to many innocent Palestinian refugees). Now in Gaza, the latest blow.

Israel’s policy is a local version of the US strategy — and it has also been tried and failed. For over two decades Israel relied on a proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army, to help it enforce the occupation of southern Lebanon. In 2000, as Israeli forces hastily withdrew, this militia collapsed just as quickly as Dahlan’s forces and many of its members fled to Israel. Hamas is now referring to the rout of Dahlan’s forces as a “second liberation of Gaza.”

A consistent element of Israeli strategy has been to attempt to circumvent Palestinian resistance by trying to create quisling leaderships. Into the 1970s, Israel still saw the PLO as representing true resistance. So it set up the collaborationist “village leagues” in the West Bank as an alternative. In 1976, it allowed municipal elections in the West Bank in an effort to give this alternative leadership some legitimacy. When PLO-affiliated candidates swept the board, Israel began to assassinate the PLO mayors with car bombs or force them into exile. Once some exiled PLO leaders, most notably Yasser Arafat, became willing subcontractors of the occupation (an arrangement formalized by the Oslo Accords), a new resistance force emerged in the form of Hamas. Israeli efforts to back Dahlan and Abbas, Arafat’s successor, as quisling alternatives have now backfired spectacularly.

In the wake of the Fatah collapse in Gaza, *Ha’aretz* reported that Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert will advise President Bush that Gaza must be isolated from the West Bank. This can be seen as an attempt to shore up Abbas whose survival Israel sees as essential to maintaining the fiction that it does not directly rule millions of disenfranchised Palestinians. A total collapse of the Palestinian Authority would expose Israel’s legal obligation, as the occupying power, to provide for the welfare of the Palestinians it rules.

## **What now for the Palestinian under occupation?**

Abbas has declared a “state of emergency” and dismissed Ismail Haniyeh the Hamas prime minister as well as the “national unity government.” The “state of emergency” is merely rhetorical. Whatever control he had in Gaza is gone and Israel is in complete control of the West Bank anyway.

Haniyeh in a speech this evening carried live on Al-Jazeera rejected Abbas' "hasty" moves and alleged that they were the result of pressure from abroad. He issued 16 points, among them that the "unity government" represented the will of 96 percent of Palestinians under occupation freely expressed at the ballot box. He reaffirmed his movement's commitment to democracy and the existing political system and that Hamas would not impose changes on people's way of life. Haniyeh said the government would continue to function, would restore law and order and reaffirm Hamas' commitment to national unity and the Mecca agreement. He called on all Hamas members to observe a general amnesty assuring any captured fighters of their safety (this followed media reports of a handful of summary executions of Fatah fighters). He also emphasized that Hamas' fight was not with Fatah as a whole, but only with those elements who had been actively collaborating — a clear allusion to Dahlan and other Abbas advisors. He portrayed Hamas' takeover as a last resort in the wake of escalating lawlessness and coup attempts by collaborators, listing many alleged crimes that had finally caused Hamas' patience to snap. Haniyeh emphasized the unity of Gaza and the West Bank as "inseparable parts of the Palestinian nation," and he repeated a call for the captors of BBC correspondent Alan Johnston to free him immediately.

The contrast between Abbas' action and the Hamas response is striking. Abbas, perhaps pushed by the same coterie of advisors, seems to be escalating the confrontation and doing so when there is no reason to believe he can prevail. Hamas, while standing firm and from a position of strength, spoke in a language of conciliation, emphasizing time and again that Hamas has a problem with only a small group within Fatah, not its rank and file. Abbas, Dahlan and their backers must be surveying a sobering scene — they may be tempted to try to take on Hamas in the West Bank, but the scale of their defeat in Gaza would have to give them pause.

Both leaderships are hemmed in. Abbas appears to be entirely dependent on foreign and Israeli support and unable to take decisions independent of a corrupt, self-serving clique. Hamas, whatever intentions it has is likely to find itself under an even tighter siege in Gaza.

Abbas, backed by Israel and the US, has called for a multinational force in Gaza. Hamas has rejected this, saying it would be viewed as an "occupying force." Indeed, they have reason to be suspicious: for decades Israel and the US blocked calls for an international protection force for Palestinians. The multinational force, Hamas fears, would not be there to protect Palestinians from their Israeli occupiers, but to perform the proxy role of protecting Israel's interests that Dahlan's forces are longer able to carry out and to counter the resistance — just as the multinational force was supposed to do in Lebanon after the July 2006 war.

Wise leaders in Israel and the United States would recognize that Hamas is not a passing phenomenon, and that they can never create puppet leaders who will be able to compete against a popular resistance movement. But there are no signs of wisdom: the US has now asked Israel to "loosen its grip" in the West Bank to try to give Abbas a boost. Although the Bush doctrine has suffered a blow, the Palestinian people have not won any great victory. The sordid game at their expense continues.

*Ali Abunimah is cofounder of the online publication The Electronic Intifada and author of One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse.*

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