

Palestinian Pinochet Making His Move?

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There's something a little misleading in the media reports that routinely describe the fighting in Gaza as pitting Hamas against Fatah forces or security personnel "loyal to President Mahmoud Abbas." That characterization suggests somehow that this catastrophic civil war that has killed more than 25 Palestinians since Sunday is a showdown between Abbas and the Hamas leadership — which simply isn't true, although such a showdown would certainly conform to the desires of those running the White House Middle East policy.

The Fatah gunmen who are reported to have initiated the breakdown of the Palestinian unity government and provoked the latest fighting may profess fealty to President Abbas, but it's not from him that they get their orders. The leader to whom they answer is Mohammed Dahlan, the Gaza warlord who has long been Washington's anointed favorite to play the role of a Palestinian Pinochet. And while Dahlan is formally subordinate to Abbas, whom he supposedly serves as National Security Adviser, nobody believes that Dahlan answers to Abbas — in fact, it was suggested at the time that Abbas appointed Dahlan only under pressure from Washington, which was irked by the Palestinian Authority president's decision to join a unity government with Hamas.

If Dahlan takes orders from anyone at all, it's certainly not from Abbas. Abbas has long recognized the democratic legitimacy and popularity of Hamas, and embraced the reality that no peace process is possible unless the Islamists are given the place in the Palestinian power structure that their popular support necessitates. He has always favored negotiation and cooperation with Hamas — much to the exasperation of the Bush Administration, and also of the Fatah warlords whose power of patronage was threatened by the Hamas election victory — and could see the logic of the unity government proposed by the Saudis even when Washington couldn't. Indeed, as the indispensable Robert Malley and Hussein Agha note, nothing has hurt Abbas's political standing as much as the misguided efforts of Washington to boost his standing in the hope of undermining the elected Hamas government.

Needless to say, only an Administration as deluded about its ability to reorder Arab political realities in line with its own fantasies — and also, frankly, as utterly contemptuous of Arab life and of Arab democracy, empty sloganizing notwithstanding — as the current one has proved to be could imagine that the Palestinians could be starved, battered and manipulated into choosing a Washington-approved political leadership. Yet, that's exactly what the U.S. has attempted to do ever since Hamas won the last Palestinian election, imposing a financial and economic chokehold on an already distressed population, pouring money and arms into the forces under Dahlan's control, and eventually adapting itself to funnel monies only through Abbas, as if casting in him in the role of a kind of Quisling-provider would somehow burnish his appeal among Palestinian voters. (As I said, their contempt for Arab intelligence knows no bounds.)

But while the hapless Abbas is little more than a reluctant passenger in Washington's strategy — and will, I still believe, repair to his former exile lodgings in Qatar in the not too distant future — Mohammed Dahlan is its point man, the warlord who commands the troops and who has been spoiling for a fight with Hamas since they had the temerity to trounce his organization at the polls on home turf.

Dahlan's ambitions clearly coincided with plans drawn up by White House Middle East policy chief, Elliot Abrams — a veteran of the Reagan Administration's Central American dirty wars — to arm and train Fatah loyalists to prepare them to topple the Hamas government. If Mahmoud Abbas has been reluctant to embrace the confrontational policy promoted by the White House, Dahlan has no such qualms. And given that Abbas has no political base of his own, he is dependent entirely on Washington and Dahlan.

Seeing the disastrous implications of the U.S. policy, the Saudis appeared to have put the kibosh on Abrams' coup plan by drawing Abbas into a unity government with Hamas. And as [Mark Perry at Conflict Forum detailed in an excellent analysis](#) Dahlan was just about the only thing that the U.S. had going for it in terms of resisting the move towards a unity government. Although his fretting and sulking in Mecca couldn't prevent the deal, the U.S. appears to have helped him fight back afterwards by ensuring that he was appointed national security adviser, a move calculated to provoke Hamas, whose leaders tend to view Dahlan as little more than a torturer and a de facto enforcer for Israel.

But Dahlan appears to have made his move when it came to integrating the Palestinian Authority security forces (currently dominated by Fatah) by drawing in Hamas fighters and subjecting the forces to the control of a politically neutral interior minister. Dahlan simply refused, and set off the current confrontations by ordering his men out onto the street last weekend without any authorization from the government of which he is supposedly a part.

The new provocation appears consistent with a revised U.S. plan, reported on by Mark Perry and Paul Woodward, that emphasized the urgency of toppling the unity government. They suggest the plan emanates from Abrams, who they say is operating at cross purposes with Condi Rice's efforts to appease the Arab moderate regimes by reviving some form of peace process. They note, for example, that Jewish American sources have told the Forward and Haaretz that Abrams recently briefed Jewish Republicans and made clear to them that Rice's efforts were merely a symbolic exercise aimed at showing Arab allies that the U.S. was "doing something," but that President Bush would ensure that nothing would come of them, in the sense that Israel would not be required to make any concessions.

Whatever the precise breakdown within the Bush Administration, it's plain that Dahlan, like Pinochet a quarter century, would not move onto a path of confrontation with an elected government unless he believed he had the sanction of powerful forces abroad to do so. If he does move to turn the current street battle into a frontal assault on the unity government, chances are it will be because he got a green light from somewhere — and certainly not from Mahmoud Abbas.

But the confrontation under way has assumed a momentum of its own, and it may now be beyond the capability of the Palestinian leadership as a whole to contain it. If that proves true, the petulance that has substituted for policy in the Bush Administration's response to the 2006 Palestinian election will have succeeded in turning Gaza into Mogadishu. But it may be too much to expect the Administration capable of anything different — after all, they're still busy turning Mogadishu into Mogadishu all over again.

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