

Palestinian president declares emergency after Hamas routs Fatah forces in Gaza

By Chris Marsden
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Palestinian President and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas dissolved the three-month-old unity government and declared a state of emergency throughout the Palestinian Authority on Thursday after Hamas militiamen routed Fatah forces and seized control of virtually the entire Gaza strip, the home of 1.4 million Palestinians.

Abbas, who no longer exercises any effective power in Gaza, announced the dismissal of the prime minister, Ismail Haniya of Hamas, and the establishment of an emergency government that would rule by decree until new elections were held some time in the future. Hamas spokesmen dismissed Abbas' decree, producing a de facto split between Gaza and the West Bank, which remains under Fatah control. Hamas defeated Fatah in parliamentary elections held in January of 2006.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice quickly issued a statement supporting Abbas' moves and signalling Washington's continuing support for Fatah in the bloody civil war with the Islamist Hamas movement.

Hamas fighters on Thursday took over the headquarters of Fatah's Preventive Security forces and the military intelligence building in Gaza City. They marched Fatah soldiers through the streets and reportedly executed some of them on the spot. Later in the evening Hamas forces seized the presidential compound, the last remaining bastion of Abbas' authority in the Gaza Strip.

By day's end, Hamas fighters controlled all of Gaza's cities and virtually every security post. According to the Reuters news agency, Hamas' armed wing issued a statement saying it had "executed" Samih al-Madhoun of Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a close ally of Abbas' top security aide Mohammad Dahlan. Reuters reported that Madhoun's body was later dragged through a Gaza refugee camp.

At least 25 Palestinians died in the fighting in Gaza Thursday, bringing the death toll from five days of civil warfare to at least 88. In reprisal for Hamas' victory in Gaza, Fatah forces carried out several raids against Hamas installations in the West Bank.

According to Israel Radio, Egypt is preparing plans to absorb thousands of Palestinians attempting to flee Gaza.

Israeli officials have warned that a Hamas victory in Gaza could lead to a military intervention by Israeli forces this summer. The Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mark Regev, called Hamas' ascendancy in Gaza "a problem for us, and a challenge." He reiterated Israel's official policy of support for Abbas, saying, "I don't think Israel or the international community should give up

on Palestinian moderates."

Washington and Jerusalem have, in fact, worked to precipitate the conflict between the Islamist movement, which enjoys majority support in Gaza, and the secular party led by the pro-Western Abbas. Since December, hundreds of Palestinians have been killed in the factional warfare.

Western sanctions imposed after Hamas' election victory, including ending funding for the Palestinian Authority, combined with Israel's withholding of customs revenues, provoked the desired internecine warfare. A further major point of friction was Abbas' refusal, with the backing of Israel and the US, to cede control of security to Hamas.

The conquest of Gaza by Hamas appears set to produce a consolidated political division between the two already geographically separate territories of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where some two million Palestinians live, at a cost of hundreds of lives and further terrible suffering imposed on the Palestinians.

In the midst of the fighting, on Wednesday, a confidential "End of Mission Report" by Alvaro de Soto, the United Nation's former Middle East envoy, was published by the British *Guardian* newspaper.

In it he warned that American pressure had "pummelled into submission in an unprecedented way since the beginning of 2007" the United Nations presence as a Middle East negotiator, and condemned Israel for setting unachievable preconditions for talks with the Palestinians.

The international boycott imposed after Hamas defeated Fatah in the January 2006 parliamentary elections was "at best extremely short-sighted" and had "devastating consequences," he wrote, while Israel had adopted an "essentially rejectionist" stance towards the Palestinians.

The demand by the Quartet—the US, the UN, the European Union and Russia—that Hamas commit to non-violence, recognise Israel and accept previous agreements "effectively transformed the Quartet from a negotiation-promoting foursome guided by a common document [the Road Map for Peace]," he wrote, "into a body that was all but imposing sanctions on a freely elected government of a people under occupation, as well as setting unattainable preconditions for dialogue."

After Hamas won the elections, it had wanted to form a broad coalition government with Fatah, run by Abbas. But, de Soto states, the US actively discouraged other Palestinian politicians

from joining. “We were told that the US was against any ‘blurring’ of the line dividing Hamas from those Palestinian political forces committed to the two-state solution,” de Soto states. As a result, it was a year before a coalition government was finally formed. Washington had also supported Israel in halting Palestinian tax revenues.

De Soto states that the Palestinian economy was all but destroyed while the US pushed for a confrontation between Fatah and Hamas. The UN diplomat quoted an unnamed US official stating, “I like this violence.”

All criticism of Israel was abandoned. De Soto writes that it would require a “Sherlockian magnifying glass” to find references to Israel’s failure to comply with its obligations. “With all focus on the failings of Hamas,” he continues, “the Israeli settlement enterprise and barrier construction has continued unabated,” undermining the possibility of creating a viable Palestinian state.

Regarding Israel, de Soto asks, “I wonder if the Israeli authorities realise that, season after season, they are reaping what they sow, and are systematically pushing along the violence/repression cycle to the point where it is self-propelling.”

He does not answer his own question, but that has clearly been Israel’s aim.

Commenting on the de Soto’s report on June 14, the *Guardian* stated, “The sanctions did not encourage the unity government to function properly. They killed it off... the impoverishment and fragmentation of Gaza is a result not just of tribal Palestinian politics, but of the cumulative despair generated by living in an open-air prison. As Israel is the jailer, it bears responsibility too for the conditions inside.”

Palestinian Foreign Minister Ziad Abu Amr, an independent, told reporters, “We really live in a cage.... If you have two brothers, put them in a cage and deprive them of basic and essential needs for life, they will fight.”

What is also clear is that the Bush administration underestimated Hamas and overestimated the ability of Abbas and Fatah to inflict a military defeat on its forces.

Time magazine drew attention to tactical differences between the Bush administration and the Israeli government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert: “Israeli officials say Washington had tried to avert the rout of Fatah in Gaza by pleading with Israel to rush in a new supply of arms.” However, “Olmert’s office refused to help Abbas, fearing that the arms would fail to make the difference and would end up in the hands of Hamas.

“Western diplomats blame Olmert’s government for consistently undermining Abbas, thus strengthening the Islamic militants. ‘Israel has one policy with the Palestinians,’ this diplomat said, ‘And that’s *keep them weak.*’”

The response of the US has been to appeal directly to Egypt, Jordan and other allies to back Abbas. It has blamed Hamas for the fighting, with State Department spokesman Sean McCormack claiming that it was aimed at sabotaging “any political process that would result in negotiations with Israel to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

In reality, while expressing concern that the situation might get out of hand, Israel has barely been able to conceal its glee over the fighting.

Unnamed Israeli spokesmen told the media that they now regarded the Gaza Strip as a “separate enemy state.” The government has responded to this effect, sealing its borders and threatening to cut off fuel and electricity supplies. A senior government official was forced to issue a denial of reports that Israel would turn off the water supply to Gaza, which would have devastating consequences.

Olmert has asked the UN to deploy a multi-national force along the Egypt-Gaza border, known as the Philadelphi Route, similar to the force now in place in southern Lebanon. He also urged the construction of a barrier to combat smuggling of arms and weapons into the Gaza Strip.

Abbas has also urged the UN to send troops, and Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and European Union Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana have said that such a force might be necessary.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post* yesterday, Calev Ben-Dor of the Reut Institute, a policy group close to the government, stated that complete control of the Gaza strip by Hamas “could be an opportunity for Israel.”

It would create “two separate political-territorial units alongside Israel—a Gaza Hamastan and a West Bank Fatah-land.”

“The de facto division between Gaza and the West Bank,” he continued, “would allow Israel to maintain its boycott of Hamas in Gaza while utilizing the emergence of a political partner in the West Bank for the first time in many years.”

This would be the de-facto creation of two Bantustan-like ghetto formations. One, “Fatah-land,” would be presided over by Abbas, functioning as a Western puppet, and would leave Israel in control of the prime land it has seized, including East Jerusalem. The other, “Hamastan,” with more than a million Palestinians huddled in a 360 square kilometre strip, would be hemmed in on one side by Israel and on the other by Egypt and a possible UN force. Both could be attacked at will by Israeli forces.

This is a dangerous strategy. Egypt and Jordan have both raised concerns that a Hamas victory and control of Gaza would stimulate a regional spread of Islamic fundamentalism, a particular threat to Egypt, given Hamas’ connections with the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt’s foreign minister, Ahmed Abul Gheit, said that the Palestinian infighting had “enraged” Arab leaders and must stop.

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