

US and Israel Stir Up Palestinian Crisis

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Global Research, June 16, 2007

Common Dreams 15 June 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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It's so obvious that Fatah and Hamas should work together to achieve an independent Palestine. Not long ago, they were proclaiming their unity. So why are they now destroying each other? If you get your news from the mainstream U.S. media, you might well think that they are just two irrational factions, driven crazy by lust for power.

But if you know how to read between the lines, even our mainstream media tell a much more complicated story, one that implicates Israel and the U.S. government too. All the quotes that follow are from reporting on the crisis in the mainstream's flagship newspapers, the New York Times and the Washington Post.

"An Israeli analyst of Palestinian affairs, Danny Rubinstein, said the 'primary reason for the break-up is the fact that Fatah has refused to fully share the Palestinian Authority's mechanism of power with its rival Hamas, despite Hamas's decisive victory in the January 2006 general elections.'" "Fatah leaders failed to heed warnings that the party's corruption and arrogance were alienating voters." "Fatah 'was forced to overrule Palestinian voters because the entire world demanded it do so,' Mr. Rubinstein added. 'Matters have come to the point where Hamas attempted to take by force what they believe they rightfully deserve.'"

The U.S. and Israel have led the world in forcing Fatah to resist Hamas' democratically-won power. In a just-released document, "the United Nations' former top Middle East envoy has sharply criticized U.S. and Israeli efforts to isolate the Hamas-led Palestinian government, saying the policy has further radicalized Palestinian opinion and undercut long-term efforts to establish a viable Palestinian state. The broadside by Alvaro de Soto was contained in a confidential 52-page report he filed before resigning from the United Nations last month. Starting in May 2005, de Soto directed U.N. efforts to ease the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." "With all the focus on the failings of Hamas," De Soto observed, "the Israeli settlement enterprise and barrier construction has continued unabated."

But Hamas' complaint is more specific. "Hamas wants a restored unity government where the security forces would all report to the interior minister." Why is that so important? The security forces have been controlled by Fatah and its security chief Mohammed Dahlan. "During 12 years in power, Fatah had repeatedly cracked down on the [Hamas] Islamists, including in 1996 when the Preventive Security Service, then led by Dahlan, arrested Hamas leaders." "Many of those who were imprisoned remember the treatment they received as cruel and humiliating."

Now "Hamas spokesmen said the movement had no political goal except to defend itself from a group within Fatah collaborating with Israel and the United States. They said they wanted to bring the security forces under the control of the unity government." "A Hamas

spokesman said the movement was defending itself, not reaching for unalloyed power. He said Hamas 'is doing the work that Fatah failed to do, to control these [security] groups,' whom he accused of crimes, chaos and collaboration with Israel and the United States."

Indeed, Israel "has made no bones about backing Fatah and attacking only Hamas targets." And the U.S. has funded and supported the Israeli efforts. "Since the election victory of Hamas in January 2006, the United States and Israel have worked to isolate and damage Hamas and build up Fatah with recognition and weaponry." The weapons go to Fatah's security forces, led by Dahlan. CIA operatives have long worked closely with Dahlan's security apparatus.

According to De Soto, "U.S. officials 'clearly pushed for a confrontation' between Hamas and Fatah. ... A U.S. [diplomatic] representative, he recalled, said: 'I like this violence . . . it means that other Palestinians are resisting Hamas.'"

In the midst of the current crisis, the Bush administration continues to take sides and stir up the conflict. "Administration officials were pushing Mr. Abbas to dissolve the power-sharing agreement between Fatah and Hamas [and] dismiss the entire government." When Abbas did just that, "Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed support for Mr. Abbas's decrees." Also, "administration officials were weighing the possibility of ... pressuring Egypt to seal the tunnels leading from its territory into Gaza; American and Israeli officials say the tunnels are often used to smuggle weapons to Hamas. One administration official suggested Wednesday that the United States might then try to prod Israel into taking down Israeli settlements in the West Bank as a way to shore up Mr. Abbas."

Of course this strategy is likely to turn the Palestinian public even further against Abbas and Fatah. But that seems to be what Israel wants. The Times and Post omitted a key passage from De Soto's report charging that Israeli policies seem "perversely designed to encourage the continued action by Palestinian militants."

Israel has always tried to keep the Palestinians divided. It played a central role in creating Hamas to prevent Fatah from consolidating its political power.

But now Israel seems to have a new reason for fanning the Fatah-Hamas feud into a civil war. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert "is expected to tell Mr. Bush that Israel favored sealing off the West Bank from the turmoil in Gaza, continuing to prevent contact between the two territories." "Some Israeli security officials say Israel wants to see the West Bank isolated from Gaza."

Why? "A Hamas-run Gaza would likely seal the coastal strip's pariah status and Israel could well block the borders." "One official suggested that Hamas's show of strength in Gaza would make it more likely that the Israeli military would intervene there this summer to cut back Hamas's military power." "Israel would be forced to retaliate harshly to protect its civilians, despite the fact that previous military incursions into the densely populated territory have failed to halt the rocket fire."

If military action is likely to be fruitless again, why would Israel still pursue this strategy? There are several reasons.

"Israel would like to seal off Gaza from the West Bank as much as possible to prevent the spread of Hamas military power there [in the West Bank], where Israeli troops still occupy

the territory. Israel would also like to confront Hamas with the responsibility for governing Gaza – providing jobs and food and security to people.” Meanwhile, “Israeli officials suggested that Israel would work with Mr. Abbas and a Fatah government in the West Bank.” There is also the political benefit any Israeli government reaps by taking a tough stand against the enemy, especially after last summer’s fiasco in Lebanon.

Most importantly, perhaps, “rival governments in the West Bank and Gaza would finalize that split, and push prospects of a Palestinian state even further away. Efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, including a recent push by moderate Arab states, would be dealt a big blow because Abbas could no longer claim to represent all Palestinians and would lose his credibility as negotiating partner.” “Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said Hamas control of Gaza would limit Israel’s ability to negotiate with Mr. Abbas.”

There are still plenty of Israelis who can see that this is self-defeating, that eventually their government must make peace. “Some in Israel are beginning to ask whether it might make sense to have indirect discussions with Hamas, which is clearly not going away.”

But doesn’t Hamas refuse to negotiate? Isn’t it sworn to Israel’s destruction? In fact, “there is debate within Hamas about how far to go in meeting Israeli and American demands. Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh says Hamas’s goal is the creation of a Palestinian state in the pre-1967 borders of West Bank and Gaza. The group’s military wing, based in Syria, says it will only consider a long-term truce when Israel withdraws from the West Bank.” “The offensive in Gaza is driven by Hamas hard-liners. It’s not clear, however, how much direction they are getting from Hamas’ exiled supreme leader, Khaled Mashaal. The movement’s pragmatists, including Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, have been largely silent in recent days.”

The pragmatists have been silenced by a civil war abetted, if not fomented, by Israel. It’s hardly the first time. At least twice last year, when the pragmatists prevailed and Hamas united with Fatah to promote a plan for peace, Israel used violence to provoke Hamas hard-liners and block the peace process, as I have reported here before.

Why would the Bush administration support this Israeli policy? Martin Indyk of the Brookings Institution describes the fears that haunt our foreign policy elite: “Gaza will be a full terrorist state, right on the fault line of the Western world. ... a haven for all the bad guys – Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad.” “Hamas is seen as a terrorist organization by the United States, Israel, and much of the West.” “A Hamas victory in Gaza would put an Iranian-backed militia not just on Israel’s northern border, but also its southern one” — or at least a supposedly Iranian-backed militia, since “it’s not clear how much direction they are getting from Iran.” “Equally alarming to Bush administration officials is the prospect that if Hamas does not take over control of Gaza, and the fighting there continues, more of Gaza’s young and increasingly frustrated population might be driven into the embrace of Al Qaeda, a rival of Hamas that, until now, had largely been shunned in Gaza.”

Perhaps this is all overheated imagining. If it is accurate, though, it may not really be so alarming to the administration’s hawks. Perhaps it would help them create the radically polarized world they have warned about, the only kind of world that can sustain the policies they still so ardently promote. Whether they want it or not, that’s the kind of world they may be helping to create as they fan the flames of Palestinian civil war.

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