

# Conflicts Forum

## NOTES & COMMENT

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### *Elliot Abram's uncivil war*

BY MARK PERRY

Deputy National Security Advisor, Elliott Abrams — who *Newsweek* recently described as “the last neocon standing” — has had it about for some months now that the US is not only not interested in dealing with Hamas, it is working to ensure its failure. In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas elections, last January, Abrams greeted a group of Palestinian businessmen in his White House office with talk of a “hard coup” against the newly-elected Hamas government — the violent overthrow of their leadership with arms supplied by the United States. While the businessmen were shocked, Abrams was adamant — the US had to support Fatah with guns, ammunition and training, so that they could fight Hamas for control of the Palestinian government.

While those closest to him now concede the Abrams' words were issued in a moment of frustration, the “hard coup” talk was hardly just talk. Over the last twelve months, the United States has supplied guns, ammunition and training to Palestinian Fatah activists to take on Hamas in the streets of Gaza and the West Bank. A large number of Fatah activists have been trained and “graduated” from two camps — one in Ramallah and one in Jericho.

The supplies of rifles and ammunition, which started as a mere trickle, has now become a torrent (*Haaretz* reports the U.S. has designated an astounding \$86.4 million for Abu Mazen's security detail), and while the program has gone largely without notice in the American press, it is openly talked about and commented on in the Arab media — and in Israel. Thousands of rifles and bullets have been poring into Gaza and the West Bank from Egypt and Jordan, the administration's designated allies in the program. (*contd on pages 2 & 3*)

### *Alastair Crooke in interview with Ahmed Mansour from Al-Jazeera on 24 January in London*

(A full transcript of the interview is available on our website)

Mr Crooke was asked about the Elliot Abram's plan, what it meant and who was responsible for putting it in place. “The aim of it is effectively to remove Hamas who won the elections in January, from power, as soon as possible in order to replace them with another government that will comply with the preconditions set out by the International Quartet and by Israel”, Mr Crooke said.

“From the outset, it has been clear that the objective is not so much in this case to try and persuade Hamas to meet certain criteria or preconditions. As one American official put it to me and my colleague, Mark, directly, these were not objectives that they wanted Hamas to reach; in fact these objectives were set so that they would not be reached”.


When asked what the plan meant in relation to Hamas acknowledging Israel, Mr Crooke did not think that at the time when the policy was conceived, it was believed that Hamas could or would recognise Israel. “Certainly, the idea that Hamas would recognise Israel, renounce violence and would recognise all previous agreements, was a bridge too far — was beyond Hamas' ability to do this while retaining the support of their constituency. And I think this was well understood from the time of the elections. It was not that they are hoping for Hamas to come forward and be able to recognise Israel. Indeed the same official whom I mentioned earlier said equally, ‘If America or the Europeans were really serious about Hamas recognising Israel there would be talks now’, people trying to find the language of recognition that would allow that to happen. And that clearly hasn't happened at all. They have been told very clearly, ‘You have to recognise Israel in absolute terms — the right and justness of Israel to exist’. Clearly Hamas is not capable to do that. And I think it would also probably be a mistake for Hamas to do that in the circumstances where Palestinian rights and needs for a state remain undefined by the international community and Quartet at this time.”

Would the plan succeed? Mr Crooke was not convinced so. “The US has now got to a point where it has a reverse Midas touch: instead of turning everything it touches into gold, it is turning it into dis-esteem and criticism. We saw in the last elections before January when the State Dept. announced it was giving help to Fatah, and the result of that was actually an increase in the popularity of Hamas and a decline in the popularity of Fatah. And I fear this is what will happen again in the Palestinian context and the danger of this is instability on the Palestinian street.” (*continued on page 2*)

*Alastair Crooke in interview with Ahmed Mansour from Al-Jazeera (contd from page 1)*

Mr Crooke was asked whether this plan could be seen within a larger framework of US foreign policy for a new Middle East. “If it was a serious attempt it might go under such a framework but I do not believe it is serious. What we are seeing now is a policy designed more to try and bring together moderate Sunni states in alliance in order to contain and circumscribe the power of Iran. In order to do that there is a price and the price that is being sought is progress on the Palestinian issue - this is the necessary for any of those who can participate in this coalition. They need to see progress there in order to satisfy the street. It is impossible for them to be in a coalition, however loosely associated with Israel and at the same time have their own people watching Palestinians dying in Gaza and the West Bank. So it has as much to do with the situation in Iran as it has to do with Palestinian internal affairs. The crucial element in all of these plans is the idea that there will be progress on the Palestinian front which will allow for either a coalition to take place against Iran or moderates to work closely with Israel in this confrontation as they perceive against Shia extremism. And there are good reasons for assuming that there is little scope for actual political progress on the Palestinian-Israeli front at this time.”

“The US and the EU are taking a very dangerous step of intervening directly within the internal political arena, between two parties and in favour of the one they prefer. It’s what one Palestinian described to me as ‘Cindrella-shoe democracy’ — where we go on having elections until we find the candidate who fits the glass shoe and then becomes the next leader. In this context, the US has looked at the consequences of such hypocrisy. If we look at the region everywhere and what we would argue is that you would see Islamists either win or do extremely well in elections throughout the Muslim world if free elections were held. And I think the US and the West has stepped back from that and they say, ‘No, we support moderates’. But they do not mean ‘moderates’ because if you look at the public opinion, most of the Muslim opinion would say Hamas is moderate, Hezbollah is moderate and the Muslim Brotherhood is moderate.

“So we are now in the process of trying to support people that we believe will most closely follow the Western interest. This is a huge strategic mistake — and a great mistake for the Europeans particularly, because we live next to the Middle East; this is our neighbourhood — to be involved in any process which is trying to support one faction against the other and decide who is legitimate in the Muslim world. This is the recipe for instability and I believe we may face a year ahead of enormous instability in the region because of these policies that we have seen.” *(A full transcript of the interview is available on our website)* 

*Elliot Abram’s uncivil war (contd from page 1)*

At first, it was thought, the resupply effort (initiated under the guise of “assist[ing] the Palestinian Authority presidency in fulfilling PA commitments under the road map to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism and establish law and order in the West Bank and Gaza,” according to a U.S. government document) would strengthen the security forces under the command of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Officials thought that the additional weapons would easily cow Hamas operatives, who would meekly surrender the offices they had only recently so dearly won.

That has not only not happened, but the program is under attack throughout the Arab world — particularly among America’s closest allies. While both Egypt and Jordan have shipped arms to Abu Mazen under the Abrams program (Egypt recently sent 1,900 rifles into Gaza and the West Bank, nearly matching the 3000 rifles sent by the Jordanians), neither Jordan’s King Abdullah nor Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak believe the program will work — and both are now maneuvering to find a way out of it. “Who can blame them?” an administration official told us recently. “While Mubarak has no love for Hamas, they do not want to be seen as bringing them down.

The same can be said for Jordan.” A Pentagon official was even more adamant, cataloguing official Washington’s nearly open disdain for Abrams’ program. “This is not going to work and everyone knows it won’t work. It is too clever. We’re just not very good at this. This is typical Abrams stuff.” This official went on to note that “it is unlikely that either Jordan or Egypt will place their future in the hands of the White House. Who the hell outside of Washington wants to see a civil war among Palestinians? Do we really think that the Jordanians think that’s a good idea. The minute it gets underway, Abdullah is finished. Hell, fifty percent of his country is Palestinian.” Senior U.S. Army officers and high level civilian Pentagon officials have been the most outspoken internal administration critics of the program, which was unknown to them until mid-August, near the end of Israel’s war against Hezbollah. When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld learned about it he was enraged, and scheduled a meeting with President Bush in an attempt to convince him the program would backfire.

Rumsfeld was concerned that the anti-Hamas program would radicalise Muslim groups among American allies and eventually endanger U.S. troops fighting Sunni extremists in Iraq. According to our reports, Rumsfeld was told by Bush that he should keep his focus on Iraq, and that “the Palestinian brief” was in the hands of the Secretary of State. After this confrontation, Rumsfeld decided there was not much he could do.

The Abrams program was initially conceived in February of 2006 by a group of White House officials who wanted to shape a coherent and tough response to the Hamas electoral victory of January. These officials, we are told, were led by Abrams, but included national security advisors working in the Office of the Vice President, including prominent neo-conservatives David Wurmser and John Hannah. The policy was approved by Condoleezza Rice. The President then, we are told, signed off on the program in a CIA “finding” and designated that its implementation be put under the control of Langley. But the program ran into problems almost from the beginning. “The CIA didn’t like it and didn’t think it would work,” we were told in October. “The Pentagon hated it, the US embassy in Israel hated it, and even the Israelis hated it.”

A prominent American military official serving in Israel called the program “stupid” and “counter-productive.” The program went forward despite these criticisms, however, though responsibility for its implementation was slowly put in the hands of anti-terrorism officials working closely with the State Department. The CIA “wriggled out of” retaining responsibility for implementing the Abrams plan, we have been told. Since at least August, Rice, Abrams and U.S. envoy David Welch have been its primary advocates and the program has been subsumed as a “part of the State Department’s Middle East initiative.” U.S. government officials refused to comment on a report that the program is now a part of the State Department’s “Middle East Partnership Initiative,” established to promote democracy in the region. If it is, diverting appropriated funds from the program for the purchase of weapons may be a violation of Congressional intent — and U.S. law.

The recipients of U.S. largesse have been Palestinian President Abu Mazen and Mohammad Dahlan, a controversial and charismatic Palestinian political leader from Gaza. The U.S. has also relied on advice from Mohammad Rashid, a well-known Kurdish/Palestinian financier with offices in Cairo. Even in Israel, the alliance of the U.S. with these two figures is greeted with almost open derision. While Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has hesitantly supported the program, many of his key advisors have made it clear that they want to have nothing to do with starting a Palestinian civil war. They also doubt whether Hamas can be weakened. These officials point out that, since the beginning of the program, Hamas has actually gained in strength, in part because its leaders are considered competent, transparent, uncorrupt and unwilling to compromise their ideals — just the kinds of democratically elected leaders that the Bush Administration would want to support anywhere else in the Middle East.

Of course, in public, Secretary Rice appears contrite and concerned with “the growing lawlessness” among Palestinians, while failing to mention that such lawlessness is exactly what the Abrams plan was designed to create. “You can’t build security forces overnight to deal with the kind of lawlessness that is there in Gaza which largely derives from an inability to govern,” she said during a recent trip to Israel. “Their [the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority] inability to govern, of course, comes from their unwillingness to meet international standards.” Even Middle East experts and State Department officials close to Rice consider her comments about Palestinian violence dangerous, and have warned her that if the details of the U.S. program become public her reputation could be stained. In fact, Pentagon officials concede, Hamas’s inability to provide security to its own people and the clashes that have recently erupted have been seeded by the Abrams plan. Israeli officials know this, and have begun to rebel. In Israel, at least, Rice’s view that Hamas can be unseated is now regularly, and sometimes publicly, dismissed.

According to a December 25 article in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, senior Israeli intelligence officials have told Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that not only can Hamas not be replaced, but that its rival, Fatah, is disintegrating. Any hope for the success of an American program aimed at replacing Hamas, these officials argued, will fail. These Israeli intelligence officials also dismissed Palestinian President Abu Mazen’s call for elections to replace Hamas — saying that such elections would all but destroy Fatah. As *Haaretz* reported: “Shin Bet chief Yuval Diskin told the cabinet Sunday [December 24] that should elections be held in the Palestinian Authority, Fatah’s chances of winning would be close to zero. Diskin said during Sunday’s weekly cabinet meeting that the Fatah faction is in bad shape, and therefore Israel should expect Hamas to register a sweeping victory.”

Apparently Jordan’s King Abdullah agrees. On the day this article appeared, December 25, Abdullah kept Palestinian President Abu Mazen waiting for six hours to see him in Amman. Eventually, Abdullah told Abu Mazen that he should go home — and only come to see him again when accompanied by Hamas leader and Palestinian Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh. Most recently, Saudi officials have welcomed Haniyeh to Saudi Arabia for talks, having apparently made public their own views on the American program to replace Hamas. And so it is: one year after the election of Hamas, and one year after Elliot Abrams determined that sowing the seeds of civil war among a people already under occupation would somehow advance America’s program for democracy in the Middle East, respect for America’s democratic ideals has all but collapsed — and not just in Iraq.

*This article was first published on Asia Times Online, 7 January 2007 *

**“Talking to the enemy”** BY ISMAIL PATEL

The Guardian has achieved what recent politicians, academics and diplomats have failed to do - it has created a forum for debate by bringing together two sides of a six-decade long conflict by printing Khalid Mish'al's [article](#) and the subsequent [response](#) by Zvi Heifetz, the Israeli ambassador in London. This is a small, but under the circumstances, significant achievement.

The past year has been an experience in new depths of pain for the Palestinian people. While Israel has vehemently worked to disfranchise Hamas since its inception, this reached new intensity following Hamas' election victory in January 2006.

Mr Heifetz's response to Mr Mish'al is telling of Hamas' reality: a party that has not only been given a mandate by its people but is slowly being acknowledged by almost all of its neighbouring states as a legitimate authority over Palestinians.

Even President Abbas, who has resisted conceding to the Hamas mandate for so long, both acknowledged Mr Mish'al as the rightful leader of Hamas and accepted Hamas' terms recently in Mecca. This admittance by President Abbas consequently meant that the summit between US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert became all but insignificant on the ground.

This is an indication of the waning influence of those present and the absence of the real power broker for the Palestinians - Hamas.

In his comment, Mr Heifetz presumes a failure in Hamas' achievements over the past year. Yet their success lies in the reality that a year ago neither he nor any of his contemporaries would have bothered to respond to Mr Mish'al publicly, especially if it was only an article in a newspaper.

However, Hamas in the past year has not only provided the Palestinians with a transparent, accountable and honest government but has further spelled out two significant points: the Palestinian struggle for liberation will continue despite Israeli, US and European sanctions and will verify that political Islam and democracy can go hand in glove.

While accusations against Palestinians for their refusal to recognise Israel are rife; a quick glance over Israel's own history, even prior to its inception in 1948 shows a state that has been unwilling to recognise even the existence of a Palestinian people.

From the pre-Israel "land without a people" propaganda, to politicians like the late Golda Meir stating "there is no such thing as a Palestinian people", there are innumerable examples of a failure to recognise an entire population. However, these facts are rarely mentioned when Israel demands that Palestinians recognise its existence, while simultaneously refusing to clarify the exact boundaries of the state it is being asked to recognise. Even after the Oslo Accords of 1993, Israel finally recognised the Palestinian people but not Palestine.

Since coming to power in January 2006, Hamas has also been faced with numerous provocative Israeli military strikes against the Palestinian people, including the Beit, Hanoun and Gaza beach massacres, and in total over 600 were killed. It also faced the arrest and imprisonment of its ministers and MPs, but it constrained its right to retaliate.

Yet the international community, which should have allowed the Hamas government to dedicate its efforts in ameliorating the dire situation of its people, instead catapulted it into a political abyss by imposing sanctions and boycotts. The US went as far as funding Fatah's leader, Mr Abbas, in recruiting a presidential guard which would sow the seeds of a civil conflict leading to over 100 Palestinian deaths. *(continued on page 5)*





Serail Protest, Beirut, December 2006.  
 “Thank you for your patience Condy, some of our children are still alive”.

Photo courtesy: Aisling Byrne



“Talking to the enemy” (continued from page 4)

Despite these alarming efforts by Israel, the US and European powers to destabilise Hamas, it has made phenomenal concessions. Hamas leaders such as Ismail Haniya have confirmed that peace and security for Palestinians comes before their own positions in government. Thus, they have obliged the international community in its demand for the formation of a unity government and accepted to have only nine ministers out of a total of 19.

Most recently, Mr Mish'al stated in the Guardian that Hamas is willing to establish a "sovereign and independent Palestinian state on the territories occupied by Israel in June 1967". This statement from a government whose leaders have sacrificed their personal standing and interests over their nation's freedom needs to be taken seriously. It is high time the international community called upon Israel for once to prove its commitment to peace by abiding by international law and dozens of UN resolutions dating as far back as 1948.

As a first step and a goodwill gesture, perhaps Israel can begin by demolishing the wall that is being built deep in the 1967-occupied territories, deliberately creating new facts on the ground and pre-empting the creation of any viable Palestinian state outside the green line border. Maybe then the world will start to believe Israel is serious about peace.

This article was first published on Guardian Comment Is Free, 22 February 2007 

**IN MEMORIAM** We are sorry to note the passing of Juliet Crawley Peck. Her work with Conflicts Forum is celebrated by her colleagues and provides a living example to the work that we do.

*In this hedonistic age saints are hard come by and, so we are told, harder still to live with...*

*But here is one, who occasionally goaded us, but whom we shall all assuredly miss.*

*Juliet Vergos Peck ( born Crawley ) would have been a remarkable woman in any age. Brought up a devout Anglican with not only a father but two brothers as ordained priests and, notwithstanding her decidedly strong views on most subjects, she never sermonised herself, but chose instead to unconsciously teach others to live by her example.*


*This was achieved essentially by devoting her life to the service of others. In the context of Conflicts Forum these "others" were as often as not, equally devout Muslims.*

*Juliet never expressed a pious or sanctimonious thought...just plenty of irreverend, infectious laughter. For Juliet*

*recognised that in the eyes of Almighty God, we are not just the Children of His Book, we are all just the same people!*

*Although Juliet suffered more than her fair share of life's woes - two husbands shot in warzones, followed by rampaging cancer - she was never heard to once complain.*

*On one occasion, almost twenty years ago now, one of her Afghan Aid drivers had met with a terrible road accident. He was a stretcher case strung together with wire coat-hangers. In a very matter- of- fact way Juliet told me that it was important to her to have him put right! Luckily there was a plane leaving for Munich that evening and some brilliant German surgeons did a stunning start-again terrestrial job; but I have no doubt that Juliet conducted the celestial side of affairs.*

*Only the good die young. Juliet was 45. She is survived by a son by her first marriage, Fynn and a daughter by her second, Lettice. ~ Mr Rupert Chetwynd, 28 February 2007, London. *

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