US and Israel plot overthrow of Hamas-led Palestinian Authority

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A *New York Times* article on February 13, "US and Israel are said to talk of Hamas ouster," has provided further evidence of Washington and Tel Aviv's determination to overthrow the recently elected Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA).

"The intention is to starve the Palestinian Authority of money and international connections to the point where, some months from now, its president, Mahmoud Abbas, is compelled to call a new election," the article stated. "The hope is that Palestinians will be so unhappy with life under Hamas that they will return to office a reformed and chastened Fatah movement...

"If a Hamas government is unable to pay workers, import goods, transfer money and receive significant amounts of outside aid, Mr. Abbas, the president, would have the authority to dissolve parliament and call new elections, the [US and Israeli] officials say, even though that power is not explicit in the Palestinian basic law."

The *Times* article again demonstrates the hypocrisy of the Bush administration's claim to be promoting democracy in the Middle East. Elections to the Palestinian legislative council on January 25 saw the Islamist organisation Hamas win a majority because it benefited from mass opposition to the corrupt Fatah-led administration and disillusionment with the US-backed "peace process." Washington's response to the upset has been to work towards the destabilisation of the incoming PA.

The newly elected representatives of the Palestinian legislative council are due to be sworn in on Saturday. Hamas has said it will form a government within two weeks.

The US and Israel are expected to demand that the Islamist-led administration publicly reject violence, recognise Israel's right to exist, and accept established Israeli-PA agreements. But as the *New York Times* acknowledged, no one in Washington or Tel Aviv expects Hamas to accept this ultimatum. The intention is to give some veneer of legitimacy to their campaign of subversion.

The US and Israel publicly justify their embargo of the Palestinians on the grounds that Hamas is internationally regarded as a terrorist organisation. But their real aim is to suppress all resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and inflict another round of collective punishment upon the Palestinian people.

Even as the Bush administration issued a formal denial of the *New York Times* report, senior officials were making public comments confirming the thrust of the piece. On February 15, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and declared that no US money would be given to a Hamas-led government.

The Bush administration will cut off all US funding to the PA, and is pressuring the European Union, individual European states, and America's allies in the Middle East to follow suit. The PA's annual budget totals some $1.9 billion and is $750 million in deficit. International contributions provide approximately $1 billion of all Palestinian revenue. The PA's 140,000 employees use their income to support an estimated one-third of the entire Palestinian population.

Rice told the Foreign Relations Committee that some US money would continue to go to humanitarian projects in Gaza and the West Bank, but only on the condition that none of the programs were connected to the PA. The Bush administration has attempted to portray this decision as a humanitarian gesture, but it is based on the political calculation that a total embargo would draw excessive international condemnation. The

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majority of the impoverished Palestinian people are dependent on international aid for their subsistence, and a total withdrawal would threaten hundreds of thousands of people with starvation.

The strategy was crudely spelled out by Dov Weissglas, advisor to acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. “It’s like meeting with a dietician,” *Haaretz* reported him as saying during a private government meeting. “We have to make them [i.e., the Palestinians] much thinner, but not enough to die.”

Israel is preparing a series of far-reaching measures. The Zionist state will soon seal its border with Gaza, preventing all Palestinian workers from entering the country. This will eliminate the income relied upon by an estimated 4,000 families.

The West Bank will also be completely cut off from Gaza. Elected parliamentarians from Gaza will therefore be prevented from sitting in the legislative council, located in the West Bank city of Ramallah. This move throws into question the possibility of Hamas being able to form a viable government. More than one in ten of the elected representatives are already in Israeli prisons, including 10 of Hamas’s 74 representatives.

Israel will also stop transferring Palestinian taxes and customs duties it collects. This funding is worth $50 million a month to the PA and its seizure by Israel will exacerbate the PA’s funding crisis. “What’s important is that the Palestinians realise the consequences of their vote,” a senior Israeli source told *Reuters*.

Olmert has also decided to force the suspension of plans to build a Gaza seaport and reconstruct its airport, which was destroyed by the Israeli military in 2002. The government is yet to decide whether Israel should cut off water and electricity supplies to the Occupied Territories. There have been warnings that such a devastating measure could backfire. Major-General Amos Gilad, head of the Defence Ministry’s Political-Military Bureau, warned that cutting power to Gaza and the West Bank “is not necessarily productive ... every step that seems attractive is not necessarily the right one to take.”

A renewed Israeli offensive in the Occupied Territories is also a distinct possibility. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the Israeli government is considering officially classifying the PA as an enemy state, equivalent to Syria and Libya. “A Hamas government will mean an authority of terror and murder,” Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz declared. “Already today Hamas is part of the axis of evil that begins in Iran, continues to Syria, Hezbollah and now to the Palestinian Authority.”

The stepped-up US and Israeli provocations have again underscored the venality of the Arab regimes. Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey, have merely encouraged Washington to engage rather than isolate a Hamas-led PA. They welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin’s inviting a Hamas delegation to talks in Moscow next month. The move was denounced by the Israeli government as a “betrayal” and raised concerns in Washington.

However, Putin stressed that his intention was to put further pressure on Hamas in line with the demands of the “Quartet” involved in drawing up the so-called “Road Map” for peace between Israel and Palestine—Russia, the US, the European Union and the United Nations. France endorsed Putin’s approach. But whatever tactical differences exist, no European government is prepared to defy the Bush administration’s aggressive stance. The efforts of the Arab regimes to foster illusions to the contrary, let alone to portray the EU or Russia as honest brokers, are a political betrayal of the Palestinians.

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