

# Fatah steps up provocations against Hamas-led Palestinian Authority

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah faction have stepped up their provocations against Hamas, amid an unprecedented economic and social crisis in the Occupied Territories engineered by Israel and the US. Several senior Fatah spokesmen have indicated that Abbas may overturn the results of January's legislative elections and sack the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA).

Fatah-led public service unions declared an indefinite strike last week, affecting approximately 80,000 Palestinian Authority workers. Half are teachers, who went on strike on September 2 at the beginning of semester. The unions' declared aim is to secure the payment of wages for workers who have not been paid in six months. The US and European-led international financial embargo of the Palestinian Authority, and Israel's monthly theft of \$50 million of Palestinian taxes and customs revenue, have left the government bankrupt. There is no doubt, however, that the strike is politically driven. The Fatah leadership is exploiting workers' frustration and desperation to destabilise the Hamas government.

Fatah-aligned armed militants have surrounded schools in the West Bank and Gaza to enforce the strike order. In Nablus on September 3, gunmen shot a 12-year-old boy in the stomach. Militants have also locked classrooms and school-gates. The teachers' union claimed that 85 to 90 percent of all school workers stopped work, but participation was reportedly much lower in Gaza, Hamas's stronghold. Other workers on strike include Palestinian Authority office and administrative staff, health workers, and sanitation employees responsible for rubbish collection, water treatment, and sewerage processing. Businesses in several West Bank towns and cities also closed after Fatah issued an appeal to join the strike.

Police and security staff have staged violent demonstrations. Thousands of armed policemen stormed the Palestinian Authority parliament compound in Gaza on Tuesday. Chanting slogans in support of Abbas, they smashed windows, fired shots in the air, and pelted stones at the parliament building. "This is a legitimate protest by the security forces because their members haven't received full salaries for the past six months," a Fatah official declared before the action. "They asked for permission to demonstrate and President Abbas, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Palestinian security

forces, approved the request."

Hamas officials have condemned the strikes as illegal and appealed to Palestinian Authority employees not to participate. The Islamists have accused Fatah of "blatant incitement" against the government. "There are some who want to exploit the strikes and create anarchy," Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh declared.

Fatah's provocations follow negotiations between Abbas and Haniyeh last month on the possible formation of a so-called national unity government. Hamas and sections within Fatah hoped that a coalition government committed to the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza through negotiation with Israel would end the crippling international embargo of the Palestinian Authority.

The Bush administration, however, has made it clear that it will not accept any government with Hamas participation. Exposing the hypocrisy of the US claim that it is promoting democracy in the Middle East, Washington has urged Abbas to overthrow the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority ever since the Islamists' election victory. According to the US, the embargo will be lifted only when Hamas formally recognises Israel, endorses the Oslo Accords and every other signed agreement with Israel, and repudiates all forms of violence.

Abbas, whose position is entirely dependent on the Bush administration, has no intention of forming a government without Washington's imprimatur. Hamas has issued three conditions for a coalition government: the release of the 39 Hamas legislators and 5 cabinet members kidnapped by Israel, the end of the international embargo, and the nomination of a Hamas prime minister. Fatah negotiators seized upon these conditions as a pretext for derailing the discussions. Turning reality on its head, Fatah officials accused Hamas of negotiating in bad faith and of trying to annexe other parties to their government.

In the past week a series of senior Fatah figures have openly threatened to overthrow the Hamas government. "If the performance of the government continues like this, President Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] will use his constitutional powers to fire the government and pick a new government," Azzam al-Ahmad, Fatah's parliamentary bloc leader, declared on September 4. "I expect he will take this decision before the

end of this month. He should do it, otherwise we will be destroyed.”

“This is an irresponsible government,” Yasser Abed Rabbo, an executive member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), declared. “There is a strong possibility that we will have an emergency government instead of a national-unity government.” An “emergency government” would be one composed of nominally non-partisan technocrats appointed by Abbas. Former World Bank and International Monetary Fund official Salam Fayyad has been touted as a possible prime minister.

According to a *Jerusalem Post* article published September 3, Abbas told the PLO executive committee that he would soon sack the Hamas government. “I’m fed up with Hamas’s games and tricks,” the president reportedly said. “I see no other solution but to announce a state of emergency and dissolve the parliament.”

In his public statements, Abbas has been careful to strike a different note. After meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Sunday, the Palestinian president stated his intention to form a national unity government and hold talks with the Israeli government. Fatah and Hamas will resume coalition negotiations this week, but there are indications that Abbas’s faction intends to issue a series of ultimatums designed to either secure Hamas’s capitulation or to create the conditions for its dismissal. “This is Hamas’s last chance,” a Fatah official told the *Jerusalem Post* yesterday. “Either they accept our terms of the establishment of a national-unity government or we will have to form a new government.”

These developments have taken place amid Israel’s ongoing offensive in the Occupied Territories. The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert seized upon the capture of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian militants near the Gaza border on June 25 in order to launch a massive bombardment aimed at terrorising the population. More than 260 people have been killed and 1,200 wounded since Israel launched “Operation Summer Rains”. While the international media barely reports developments in Gaza and the West Bank, the Israeli Defence Forces are conducting daily attacks—shooting civilians, assassinating militants, bombing homes and businesses, and destroying civilian infrastructure, such as electricity stations and water treatment plants.

Israel’s criminal measures—all of which have been backed by the Bush administration—have exacerbated the economic and social crisis induced by the international financial embargo of the Palestinian Authority. Poverty and unemployment have skyrocketed, and some Palestinians are now forced to scavenge through rubbish dumps to find food for their families. “The strangulation of commerce and trade has ruined the economy, it has brought the institutions of government to a point of near-meltdown and badly shaken the society,” Karen Abuzayd, head of the UN Relief and Works Agency, declared on Friday. “These pressures and tactics have not resulted in a desire for

compromise on the part of the government or the people, or yet the fall of the government, but rather have created mass despair, anger and a sense of hopelessness and abandonment.”

Fatah’s strategy of manipulating these sentiments against the elected government is a dangerous one. The legislative election revealed deep hostility towards Abbas and his party. People in Gaza and the West Bank have become disillusioned with the false promises and dashed hopes engendered through the “peace process”. The Oslo Accords failed to alleviate the Palestinians’ suffering and did nothing to stop Israel’s military attacks and settlement expansion. Discontent also focussed on the corruption of previous Fatah-dominated PA governments and the worsening social conditions in the Occupied Territories. While its religio-communal politics offers no genuine alternative for the Palestinian masses, Hamas has forged a support base through its social welfare work, anti-corruption stance, and criticisms of the Oslo Accords.

Fatah dominates the public service union leaderships, and the police and security forces, but it is widely distrusted among ordinary Palestinian Authority workers. The *Jerusalem Post* reported on August 31: “Many of the demonstrators who took to the streets of Ramallah and Gaza City to demand their salaries chose to chant slogans against Abbas and Fatah, accusing them of financial corruption and of being part of the US-led sanctions against the Hamas government.”

If Abbas does dissolve the Hamas government, Fatah will find itself further discredited. The president is already widely viewed as little more than a lackey of the US and Israel, and a coup within the Palestinian Authority would be understood as engineered by Washington. Far from resolving anything, the removal of the government would only deepen the divisions in Gaza and the West Bank, setting the stage for a possible eruption of open civil war.



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