

# Palestinian parliament sworn in as US and Israel step up destabilisation drive

Rick Kelly  
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The newly elected Palestinian legislative council, in which Hamas holds 74 of the 132 seats, was sworn in on Saturday, February 18. The Israeli government marked the occasion by confirming that it will impose a raft of further repressive measures against the Palestinian people in response to the Islamists' control of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

"It is clear that in the light of the Hamas majority in the parliament and the instructions to form a new government that were given to the head of Hamas, the Palestinian Authority is in practice becoming a terrorist authority," acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared.

The Israeli government formally announced that it was seizing Palestinian tax and customs revenue worth an estimated \$50 million a month. It has also imposed a series of other measures, including the intensification of roadblocks and checkpoints throughout the Occupied Territories. Palestinian sources reported that access to Ramallah, the West Bank city where the parliament sits, was completely cut off by Israeli forces. Representatives elected from Gaza were forced to participate in the parliament's opening session through video conferencing.

Israel ignored appeals from the non-American members of the "Quartet"—the European Union, United Nations, and Russia—to delay punitive measures at least until a new PA government led by Hamas is formed. This may take between two and five weeks. A number of European powers, including France and Russia, hoped to use this time to negotiate a compromise and encourage Hamas to modify a number of its positions.

The Islamists have indicated that they are willing to engage in such a process. The *Jerusalem Post* reported last week that the Hamas leadership was drafting a new charter which will remove the anti-Semitic references contained in the founding charter and may refrain from demanding Israel's destruction.

Hamas has nominated Ismail Haniyeh as prime minister and Abdel Aziz Duaik as speaker of the parliament. Both men have expressed a willingness to negotiate a long-term truce with the Zionist state based upon an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders. Haniyeh has suggested that he will attempt to form a government in which non-party "technocrats" will play a prominent role.

*Haaretz* editorial on Monday stated: "At this stage Hamas is acting more responsibly than the Israeli government. Its representatives speak of a new era, of a transition from terror to politics, of continued opposition to occupation via other means, and of aspirations to a long-term *hudna* (cease-fire)."

The Israeli government is only able to maintain its belligerent stance because it enjoys the full backing of the Bush administration.

Washington announced that not only is it cutting off all financial aid to the PA, but that it is demanding the incoming government return a previous payment of \$50 million. Its demand can only be understood as a provocation.

With most international funding suspended or about to be suspended, the PA is on the verge of outright bankruptcy. Its monthly deficit is now estimated at \$110 million, and it is already falling behind on salary payments to some of its 140,000 employees, including those to the 58,000 members of the police and security agencies. A number of armed demonstrations by PA security men demanding their pay have been held in recent weeks. As the new parliament was being sworn in on Saturday, about 200 policemen, some firing their weapons in the air, marched on Gaza's government complex, demanding wages they claimed were two months overdue.

The Bush administration has also continued to ignore Israeli military incursions in the Occupied Territories.

On Sunday, February 19, two 20-year-old Palestinian men were killed in northern Gaza by an Israeli aircraft missile, allegedly as they were preparing to fire a Qassam rocket. On the same day, another two youths, both aged 17, were killed during a large-scale military raid on the Balata refugee camp, near Nablus in the West Bank. Palestinian sources insist that the boys were only throwing stones at Israeli troops. A senior Islamic Jihad commander was assassinated during the raid and seven alleged militants arrested. At least one of the detained men, reportedly a Fatah-aligned fighter, had part of his house demolished by the Israelis. The operation in the refugee camp is expected to continue for several days.

While the international media have largely ignored Israel's recent military operations in the West Bank and Gaza, civilian casualties have continued to mount. In one horrific incident last week, a 19-year-old mentally handicapped youth was shot dead

by Israeli soldiers. On February 15, Israeli special forces raided Qabatiyah, near the West Bank city of Jenin. After young residents threw stones against the invading forces, Mujahed Al-Simadi was killed after he was seen carrying a toy gun.

The Bush administration is pressing its allies in the Middle East not to fund the new Hamas-led PA. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is currently visiting Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Foreign ministers from several Arab countries are scheduled to meet on February 27 in Algeria, in the lead-up to an Arab League summit. The league's secretary-general, Amr Moussa, told Associated Press that member states were considering a plan to give \$50 million a month to the PA. A final decision will not be made until next month, when the summit is held in Sudan.

A contribution of \$50 million a month would only make up for Israel's confiscation of Palestinian taxes and custom revenues, and would not alter the massive deficit faced by the PA after the withdrawal of all US and at least some European money.

Moreover, there is widespread scepticism within the West Bank and Gaza that any pledge of financial support will ever be delivered. In 2002 the Arab League promised to give the PA \$600 million a year, but no more than \$100 million was ever received, according to a senior Palestinian official quoted by Associated Press.

Hamas is likely to be reliant on Iran to make up much of its budgetary deficit. The Islamists' leader in exile, Khaled Mashaal, met with senior Iranian leaders in Tehran last Sunday. While there was no public announcement of any specific Iranian pledge, the following day Iran's "Supreme Leader," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called on all Muslim countries to aid Hamas.

The Bush administration has used the Hamas-Iran talks to further its increasingly aggressive stance against the Iranian regime. Rice last week declared Iran "the central banker for terrorism" and warned it not to fund the Palestinians. "Iran has its own troubles with the international community and it might want to think twice about enhancing those troubles with the international community, because Iran is clearly not in a very good position right now," she declared. "They're in the Security Council and unless they find a way to deal better with the international system, that situation is only going to get worse."

The Israeli government has long pressed for the US to take a more aggressive position against Iran, which it accuses of sponsoring terrorism in the region. Tel Aviv seized upon a media report last week that a web site run by Hamas's armed wing disclosed that the Lebanese-based Islamist organisation Hezbollah had funded some of its operations in the West Bank. Hezbollah is a Shia fundamentalist outfit with close connections to Tehran.

Washington and Tel Aviv's efforts to destabilise the

Palestinian parliament have received the full support of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The London-based *Sunday Times* reported on February 19 that senior representatives of Abbas's Fatah faction have held secret talks with Israeli and American officials in the US.

"What happened last month [i.e., the election result] was a political accident that can still be reversed," Jibril Rajoub, Abbas's security advisor, told the meeting, according to the *Times*. "I believe that we can turn the clock back and new parliamentary elections are not ruled out in due course."

Rajoub told the *Times* that Abbas knew about the discussion and "was encouraged and approved the understanding achieved between the two sides."

The outgoing parliament, which was dominated by Fatah, the party founded by the late Yasser Arafat, voted to create a new constitutional court whose nine judges would be appointed by President Abbas. The court effectively provides Abbas with veto power over any legislation introduced by the new PA, and may also provide the vehicle for the dissolution of parliament and the calling of fresh elections. On Saturday, senior Fatah negotiator Saeb Erekat warned that if Hamas repudiated Abbas's policies, "it will be a violation of the constitution and will lead to a major crisis."

In his opening address to the new parliament Abbas similarly warned: "We have not and will not accept any questioning of the [Palestinian-Israeli] accords' legitimacy. Indeed, from the hour they were endorsed, they became a political reality to which we remain committed."

Abbas's collaboration with Israeli and American attempts to overturn the recent election results demonstrates the degree to which he functions as the figurehead of what amounts to a quisling regime. He lacks any measure of popular support among ordinary Palestinians and his rule is wholly reliant on the support of the Bush administration.



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