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Hamas and the seizure of Gaza

In mid-June 2007 Hamas completed the seizure of Gaza, defeating elements of the nationalist Fatah movement. The development effectively left the Palestinian Territories divided, with the Islamists of Hamas in control of Gaza, and Fatah retaining control of the West Bank.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned Hamas's actions and announced the formation of an Emergency Government largely composed of technocrats. He said he would rule by decree until the conditions were right for fresh elections. The Prime Minister of the outgoing Government, Ismail Haniya, rejected the move, although Hamas leaders said that they would be willing to talk to Mr Abbas.

The EU and US have normalised relations with the new Government and the Quartet (the US, EU, UN and Russia) has agreed to lift the economic embargo on direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority that had been in place since Hamas entered government in early 2006.

This paper looks at the background to these events and considers their potential implications.

Tim Youngs and Ben Smith

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Summary of main points

On 14 June 2007 the Palestinian group, Hamas, completed the seizure of Gaza, ending months of rivalry and conflict with elements of the paramilitary forces belonging to the nationalist Fatah movement. The development effectively left the Palestinian Territories divided into two distinct entities, with the Islamists of Hamas in control of Gaza, and Fatah retaining control, at present, of the West Bank.

The seizure of Gaza came a year and half after Hamas had broken the decades-long political dominance of Fatah by winning the parliamentary elections of January 2006. The elections left Hamas in control of the government of the Palestinian Authority, but with the Presidency in the hands of Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas. Tortuous efforts to forge a common political position appeared to have yielded results in February 2007 with the formation of a National Unity Government, but the new administration proved unable to halt the violence. Some observers believe Hamas chose to act in June to forestall US-backed efforts to rebuild Fatah as a force capable of taking on Hamas militarily.

President Abbas condemned the actions of Hamas in Gaza and dismissed the National Unity Government, announcing the formation of a largely technocratic Emergency Government in its place. He said he would rule by decree until the conditions were right for fresh elections. The Prime Minister of the outgoing government, Ismail Haniya, rejected the move, although Hamas leaders said subsequently that they would be willing to talk to Mr Abbas, a suggestion that the President has thus far rejected.

The international community condemned the violence, but welcomed the formation of the Emergency Government. Israel agreed to unfreeze a first tranche of tax revenues belonging to the Palestinian Authority, with the remainder of the estimated \$500-\$700 million to be transferred within six months if the PA shows progress towards disarming militias. Israel also undertook to release around 250 Fatah prisoners held in Israeli jail. The European Union and the United States said they would normalise relations with the new Government and the Quartet (the US, EU, UN and Russia) agreed to lift the economic embargo on direct assistance to the PA that had been in place since Hamas entered government in early 2006.

The events in Gaza seem likely to have a far-reaching impact not only in Israel/Palestine, but also throughout the region. Some analysts hope a "West Bank first" approach can be adopted in the moribund peace process with Israel, whereby a loosening of the occupying regime, the establishment of good governance by Fatah and an infusion of international assistance would bolster President Abbas and undermine support for Hamas. Others fear such scenarios are unrealistic, given the weakness of the Israeli Government, the fragmentation of Fatah and its failure thus far to reform. They warn that the isolation of Hamas risks radicalising the Palestinians further and leading Islamist groups across the region to conclude that revolutionary violence can achieve more than political engagement.

For background on the peace process, the rise of Hamas and developments at a regional level, see Research Papers 05/29, *The Middle East Peace Process: Prospects after the Palestinian Presidential Elections*, 29 March 2005; 06/17, *The Palestinian Parliamentary Election and the rise of Hamas*, 15 March 2006; and 07/08, *The crisis in Lebanon*, 19 January 2007. For details on the humanitarian situation and international aid levels, see Standard Note, SN/EP/4382, *UK aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories*.

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I Background

A. Oslo Accords and the era of Fatah dominance

For most of the period since the 1960s, the dominant force on the Palestinian political scene has been the secular nationalist Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and its main Fatah¹ faction. That dominance was recognised in the series of agreements negotiated between Israel and the PLO under the Oslo Process from 1993 onwards, which was intended to lead to the formation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza within five years.² In return for recognising the state of Israel, Fatah was effectively awarded a monopoly on power and armed force, allowing it to exclude its political rivals from the fledgling institutions of government in the newly formed Palestinian Authority (PA).

Control of the PA's new police and security forces provided the Fatah leadership with an important means of dispensing patronage to disaffected elements, with membership providing one of the few reliable sources of employment in the Palestinian Territories. Nonetheless, the terms of the Oslo Accords meant the 30,000-strong forces were kept deliberately weak, equipped with small arms but denied access to heavy weaponry, due primarily to concerns among Israelis that such weapons could eventually be used against them in the event of a breakdown in the peace process.

That weakness was further exacerbated by President Arafat, who oversaw the establishment of a plethora of security forces, with little coordination or definition of their roles. Keeping the security forces in competition was seen by many observers as a ploy by Arafat, allowing him to play them off against one another and thereby prevent any one institution from establishing a power base in its own right and posing a threat to his leadership.

B. Emergence of Hamas

The Sunni Islamist³ movement, Hamas,⁴ first appeared as a significant political and military rival to Fatah in the late 1980s, during the first Palestinian Intifada. The movement's reputation for discipline and integrity, coupled with its establishment of extensive social welfare programmes in the West Bank and Gaza, gained it an increasingly large following among Palestinians. Some commentators believe the emergence of the Islamists was initially welcomed and encouraged by Israel, which valued Hamas as a potential counter-weight to the nationalist PLO. However, as the

¹ The name Fatah is an inverted acronym derived from the initials of the Arabic name, *Harakat Tahrir Filistin* (Palestine Liberation Movement).

² A map of the region is included as Appendix 1. Background on the Oslo Accords and the peace process can be found in Section II of Library Research Paper 05/29, *The Middle East Peace Process: prospects after the Palestinian Presidential Elections*, of 29 March 2005.

³ The term 'Islamist' is used to denote people or groups who seeks to return Islam to centrality, to make faith the determining component of identity and behaviour and to structure society in accordance with Islamic principles.

⁴ Hamas is an acronym of *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement). Its ideology is based on that of the Egyptian Sunni Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and incorporates elements of Palestinian nationalism.

movement's popularity increased and its political and military powers expanded, it came to be seen as a threat to Israel in its own right.

Although hampered by a shortage of arms, its nascent military wing, which was to become known as the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, proved during the five-year Intifada to be both resourceful and capable. During the course of the Intifada, it carried out numerous attacks on Israeli soldiers and settlers, despite the extensive penetration of Palestinian society by Israeli intelligence with its network of informers.

Hamas was strongly critical of the PLO for concluding the Oslo Accords in 1993, stating its opposition to negotiations with the Israeli state and accusing the PLO of collaboration with the occupation. In April 1994 the military wing launched its first suicide bomb attack inside Israel in response to the shooting of 29 Palestinians by a Jewish settler in Hebron. Further suicide attacks on civilians followed during 1994, despite intensive Israeli efforts to find the bomb-maker behind the attacks, Yehia Ayyash. Those efforts finally succeeded in January 1996, when Ayyash was killed by a booby-trapped mobile phone, a move that was seen by Hamas as a violation of a tacit agreement with Israel from the previous year to halt attacks. The death of Ayyash was followed by a renewed spate of suicide bombings during early 1996, which killed scores of Israeli civilians and left hundreds injured.

The peace process entered a period of stagnation between 1996 and 1999. The Palestinian public increasingly lost faith in the incremental approach of the Oslo Accords and frustration grew at the continued growth of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and around East Jerusalem, the building of settler-only roads, and what has been described as the "salami-slicing away" of their prospective state.⁵ Furthermore, the reputation of the PA became increasingly tarnished in the eyes of many Palestinians by the widespread perception of official corruption and excess on the part of the Fatah elite. As discontent with Fatah and the PA's lack of accountability increased, so too did popular support for Hamas.

C. Outbreak of the second Intifada

The collapse of the peace process and the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 further bolstered the standing of Hamas, allowing it to claim a leading role in fighting the Israeli occupation.⁶ A vicious cycle of violence took hold, with Israel carrying out "targeted assassinations" of leading Hamas activists, including its spiritual leader Sheikh Yassin, while Hamas mounted numerous suicide bomb attacks and rocket strikes that left hundreds of Israelis dead.

As the violence escalated, Israeli frustration grew at the perceived failure or unwillingness of the PA security institutions to halt the activities of militant groups. Fatah itself appeared torn between resistance and restraint, with the leadership promising the

⁵ Alastair Crooke, 'Hamas and the Fatah radicals will transform Palestinian politics', *Prospect*, February 2006

⁶ For background on the reasons behind the Intifada, see House of Commons Library Research Paper 05/29, *The Middle East Peace Process: Prospects after the Palestinian Presidential Elections*, 29 March 2005.

international community that it would clamp down on Hamas and the smaller (Shi'a) Islamic Jihad movement, while Fatah-affiliated fighters from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades increasingly engaged in joint operations against Israel with those same groups as part of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC). Efforts reportedly authorised by senior Fatah and PA officials to import around 50 tons of heavier weaponry from Iran in early 2002, including Katyusha rockets and anti-tank missiles, were foiled by Israeli special forces when a ship, the *Karine A*, was intercepted in the Red Sea. Other sources of weaponry included arms and explosives bought on the Israeli black market, and smuggled in by sea or through tunnels between Gaza and the Egyptian-controlled Sinai peninsula. As a result, the PA's governing institutions and security forces increasingly became a target for Israeli forces in their own right, with buildings destroyed and equipment confiscated during a series of major incursions into Palestinian-controlled areas during 2002-03. Israel's construction of a security fence in the West Bank from 2003 led to a reduction in the number of suicide bomb attacks but generated further Palestinian resentment at the confiscation of land and the encirclement of their towns and villages.⁷

The death of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in November 2004 was followed by a lull in the violence and fresh presidential elections in January 2005. The new president and chairman of the PLO, Mahmoud Abbas,⁸ who won 62% of the vote, sought to capitalise by securing a period of calm (*tahadieh* in Arabic) from Hamas and other militant groups, halting attacks inside Israel proper. The lull raised hopes that the moribund peace process could be revived, hopes that were bolstered by the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005.⁹ The latter did little to boost Fatah, however, in that Hamas was able to argue that Israel had been forced out by its campaign of armed resistance, not as a result of negotiations.¹⁰

II Hamas in government

A. Parliamentary election of January 2006

The standing of the PLO declined further during the autumn of 2005, as internal splits began to emerge. The PA struggled to impose its control over Gaza and the territory became increasingly beset by inter-factional violence and descended into lawlessness. The splits within Fatah had increased after the death of Arafat, whose personal authority and co-option of discontented factions had helped ensure some level of unity. Disputes over party primaries in late 2005 initially led a more militant "new guard" faction headed by the jailed Marwan Barghouti to register its own list of candidates, although a united list

⁷ See House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/IA/3065, *Israel and the West Bank Barrier*, for more detail.

⁸ Mr Abbas won 62.3 per cent of the vote. His nearest rival, the human rights activist Mustafa Barghouti, won just under 20 per cent. Turnout was around 63 per cent. Mr Abbas said subsequently he would not stand for re-election when his four-year term is complete in 2009.

⁹ Israel withdrew its military forces and dismantled the Jewish settlements in the territory, but retained control of Gaza's borders, airspace and territorial water.

¹⁰ See House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/IA/3761, *Development of the Gaza Strip after Disengagement*, for background on the process of disengagement.

was eventually submitted at the end of December 2005 due to fears that disunity within Fatah would boost Hamas.¹¹

Pre-election predictions of a Fatah victory or a tie with Hamas proved incorrect, with the latter (running under the name 'Change and Reform') winning 74 seats in the 132-seat chamber (56% of the seats). Fatah came second with 45 seats (34%).¹² Turnout was 77%.¹³

Various reasons have been suggested for Hamas's victory, not least of which was the fact that it offered a clear alternative on the central issues for voters, namely tackling the corruption and inefficiency associated with Fatah and addressing the inability of the PA to enforce law and order. Furthermore, Hamas mounted a highly effective and disciplined campaign and appears to have been successful in disguising the true extent of its support beforehand by ensuring its supporters gave false or misleading answers as to their voting intentions, thereby undermining the accuracy of pre-election polling.¹⁴

As Hamas officials had predicted in late 2005, the post-election phase was to prove turbulent, as Fatah, for so long the party of government, struggled to reconcile itself to losing power. Talks with Fatah and other factions on forming a coalition government failed and on 27 March 2006 Prime Minister-designate Ismail Haniya presented his government programme to the Palestinian parliament, along with a cabinet list that contained only Hamas representatives.

The election left the Palestinian Authority split between the Fatah-controlled Presidency, under Mahmoud Abbas, and the new Hamas-led Government that took office in March 2006. Israel, the US and EU cut their diplomatic and financial ties with the Palestinian Government, saying that contacts would resume only if Hamas agreed to recognise Israel, abide by existing agreements between the PA and Israel, and renounce violence.¹⁵

The Hamas leadership reiterated its earlier positions on being prepared to deal with the reality of previous agreements with Israel and being willing to negotiate a long-term truce

¹¹ One commentator described the Fatah primaries as follows: "The primaries were non-binding, and when the old guard saw the landslide in favour of the new generation, they chose simply to ignore it when drawing up the official candidate list—save for the unavoidable inclusion of Barghouti at its head. The younger generation responded with their own list that would have split the Fatah vote. Bitter wrangling followed." Alastair Crooke, 'Hamas and the Fatah radicals will transform Palestinian politics', *Prospect*, February 2006

¹² Source: Central Election Commission, Palestine, http://www.elections.ps/pdf/Final_Result_distribution_of_PLC_seats-EN2.pdf

¹³ For background on the elections and the rise of Hamas, see House of Commons Library Research Paper 06/17, *The Palestinian Parliamentary Election and the rise of Hamas*, 15 March 2006

¹⁴ Zaki Chehab, *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of Militants, Martyrs and Spies*, London 2007, p.2

¹⁵ In June 2006, however, the International Quartet (involving the EU, US, UN and Russia) approved the establishment by the EU of a Temporary International Mechanism (TIM) to provide around \$120 million in aid to the Palestinians. A three-part structure was devised to bypass the Hamas-led government by channelling funds through an expanded World Bank emergency services support programme for essential health supplies, and through a reinforced EU interim emergency relief contribution for fuel and other essential items. No funds were provided for the payment of salaries to PA employees, with the exception of health employees, who received basic allowances. For details, see <http://www.eu-delegation.org.eg/en/TIM%20US-EC%20June%2015%202006%20rev.pdf>

with Israel.¹⁶ On the issue of recognising Israel, Hamas officials ruled out explicit recognition at that stage, saying they would be ready to take such a step once Israel had withdrawn from the West Bank and Gaza, halted settlement construction and recognised the rights of Palestinians to self-determination. As it became clear that the US and EU viewed those undertakings as insufficient, Hamas said it would seek financial support from Arab states and other sources to compensate for the expected sharp decline in financial assistance from Western governments.

B. Rise in factional violence during 2006

The election victory for Hamas exacerbated tensions with Fatah and its affiliated paramilitary forces and there was sporadic violence in the immediate aftermath. By May 2006 relations had deteriorated rapidly, as Hamas moved to establish its own rival security force, having failed to exert its authority over the Fatah-dominated PA security institutions. The deployment in Gaza of a new 3,000 member Executive Force during May 2006 under the control of the Hamas-led Interior Ministry was condemned by President Abbas as illegal and anti-constitutional. He issued a presidential decree nullifying the move, insisting that control of security forces should remain united under the presidency.

Clashes between the new force and Fatah paramilitaries erupted in mid-May 2006, prompting warnings of the potential for civil war in the Palestinian Territories. The factional tensions were exacerbated by violence involving criminal groups and clan-based militias, with the latter increasingly filling the vacuum left by the PA as a source of basic governance.

A conference was convened in late May involving representatives from Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad with the aim of resolving differences between their factions and forging a united position towards Israel. Leading members of Hamas and Fatah, many of whom were in Israeli jail, reached agreement on a so-called 18-point "Prisoners' Document" setting out the main principles for seeking a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967 and for continuing resistance in those areas.¹⁷ That was subsequently revised during intensive negotiations, brokered by Egypt, which resulted in the adoption of an 18-point National Conciliation Document.¹⁸

A central aim of the document was to restore a degree of unity between the rival Palestinian factions and halt the slide towards civil conflict. To that end, the factions agreed to work on forming a national unity government and to reactivate the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by ensuring the participation of all factions, including Hamas. With regard to peace negotiations with Israel, the document stressed the Palestinians' right to self

¹⁶ For background on Hamas and its position on violence, the Middle East Peace Process and recognition of Israel, see House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/IA/4147, *Hamas and the Middle East Peace Process*, 3 October 2006.

¹⁷ The full text of the National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners, 11 May 2006, carried by the Al-Quds newspaper, is available online at: <http://www.jmcc.org/documents/prisoners.htm>

¹⁸ The full text of the revised National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners, 28 June 2006, is online at: <http://www.jmcc.org/documents/prisoners2.htm>

determination, including their right to establish an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital on all territories occupied in 1967; to secure the right of return for Palestinian refugees to their homes; and to liberate all prisoners and detainees. Some observers suggested the undertaking should be viewed as an implicit recognition by Hamas of the Israeli state, but others disputed that interpretation. The factions agreed that responsibility for negotiations with Israel would lie with the PLO and President Abbas. They also stressed the right of the Palestinian people to focus its resistance to the occupation in territories occupied in 1967, in tandem with political action and negotiations.

That progress on the domestic Palestinian front was accompanied, however, by an escalation in violence in Gaza as Palestinian militant groups fired rudimentary short-range Qassam rockets from Gaza into Israel and launched a suicide bomb attack in Tel Aviv. Israel responded with artillery and air strikes against suspected militant leaders. Among the dead were one member of Hamas's military wing and the leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, Jamal Abu Samhadana, who had been appointed as a senior official in the Hamas-run Interior Ministry. A number of Palestinian civilians were also killed. Among them were seven civilians who died in an Israeli artillery strike on a beach in Gaza. The military wing of Hamas responded by declaring an end to its informal 16-month truce and launching rockets across the border into Israel.

The violence intensified in late June 2006 after Hamas fighters launched a raid into Israel from Gaza, killing two soldiers and capturing an Israeli conscript, Corporal Gilad Shalit.¹⁹ A similar kidnapping incursion into northern Israel by the Lebanese group, Hizbollah, in mid-July led to a month-long conflict.²⁰ Israel responded to the Hamas raid by sending forces into Gaza and the West Bank where they detained eight Hamas government ministers and more than 20 legislative council members. Israeli aircraft also struck the only power station in Gaza and bombed the office of Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, having declared that they were openly seeking to undermine the Hamas Government due to its policies of terror.²¹ Egyptian mediation resulted in a limited agreement to partially re-open the Gaza border to allow the passage of supplies, following concerns about a growing humanitarian crisis in the territory. It was not until November 2006, however, that a cessation of violence came into effect, bringing to an end five months of Israeli operations in Gaza.

Further Palestinian negotiations culminated in the conclusion on 11 September 2006 of an 8-point agreement between Mahmoud Abbas and Ismail Haniya setting out a political agenda for the proposed national unity government involving Hamas and Fatah. However, the agreement, which reportedly included an implicit endorsement of the Quartet's conditions (recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence and acceptance of past agreements with Israel), collapsed within a matter of days after Hamas contested

¹⁹ The attack was claimed by the military wing of Hamas, the Popular Resistance Committees and the previously unknown Army of Islam. The groups demanded that Israel release the estimated 95 Palestinian women and 313 under-18s held in its prisons. A new demand was added on 1 July 2006 for the release of 1,000 Palestinian, Arab and Muslim prisoners in Israeli jails.

²⁰ For details on the conflict in Lebanon in July-August 2007, see House of Commons Library Research Paper RP 07/08, *The crisis in Lebanon*, 19 January 2007.

²¹ See Paul Reynolds, '[Analysis: Israel's wider aims in Gaza](#)', BBC News Online, 3 July 2006

President Abbas' explicit statement at the UN on 21 September that a new government would recognise Israel.²²

Tension in Gaza increased in mid-September 2006 with the assassination of a senior officer in the Palestinian General Intelligence Service, General Jad Tayeh. A group calling itself 'Al-Qaeda in Palestine' claimed responsibility. By early October 2006 armed clashes between Fatah and Hamas fighters had left at least 10 people dead in what was the worst inter-factional fighting for a decade as tensions ran high over the lack of pay for members of the PA's security forces. The Fatah-affiliated al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades said it held the Hamas leadership responsible for the deaths and threatened to kill three Hamas officials, including the head of the group's political bureau, Khaled Meshaal. The sense of crisis in Gaza was heightened further on 8 November when Israeli tank fire killed 18 Palestinian civilians in Beit Hanoun. Two women and six children were among the dead. The attack drew widespread international criticism and expressions of distress from Prime Minister Olmert, who insisted the deaths had occurred as a result of a "technical failure".²³

President Abbas announced on 30 November 2006 that talks with Hamas on the formation of a unity government were at a dead end, saying in mid-December that he supported a move to early parliamentary elections to resolve the deadlock. Further armed clashes occurred after what Hamas claimed was an assassination attempt by Fatah against Prime Minister Haniya on 14 December. Fatah denied the claim. A ceasefire was agreed six days later, although fighting continued on an almost daily basis and both sides were reported to be increasing their military presence in Gaza.

C. Formation of a National Unity Government

Talks in Damascus between Khaled Meshaal and Mahmoud Abbas during January 2007 again failed to reconcile their differences. The fighting in Gaza resumed within days, with Hamas overrunning a number of compounds used by Fatah security forces and Fatah fighters setting parts of the Hamas-run Islamic University ablaze.

Under heavy diplomatic pressure from the Saudis and Egyptians, a renewed attempt was made to bridge the differences between the two parties, culminating on 8 February 2007 in the signing of a coalition deal in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The so-called Mecca Accord came in the form of a letter from President Abbas designating Prime Minister Ismail Haniya to form a new national unity government:

In my capacity as the head of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the president of the Palestinian Authority, and after reading the Basic Law, and in accordance with my authorities:

²² Prime Minister Haniya said: "I personally will not head any government that recognises Israel. We support establishing a Palestinian state in the land of 1967 at this stage, but in return for a ceasefire, not recognition." Source: *The Irish Examiner*, 23 September 2006. The text of President Abbas' speech is online at: <http://www.jmcc.org/documents/abbasspeechun06.htm>

²³ See '[Thousands mourn Beit Hanoun dead](#)', BBC News Online, 9 November 2007

a) I designate you to form the upcoming Palestinian government within the time specified under the Basic Law (five weeks).

b) After forming the government and presenting it to us, it should be presented to the Palestinian Legislative Council for a vote of confidence.

c) I call upon you as the head of the upcoming Palestinian government to commit to the higher interests of the Palestinian people, to preserve its rights and to preserve its achievements and to develop them, and to work in order to achieve its national goals as were approved by the Palestine National Council, the clauses of the Basic Law and the National Reconciliation Document and the decisions of the Arab summit.²⁴

Based on this, I call upon you to respect international resolutions and the agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization.²⁵

The two parties agreed that Hamas would retain the Premiership, with a Fatah official, Azzam Ahmad appointed as Deputy Prime Minister. A number of key posts were given to independents. Salam Fayyad, a pro-reform technocrat with experience at the World Bank and good relations with the West, became Finance Minister, while Ziad Abu Amr took the post of Foreign Minister. The final point of contention was the post of Interior Minister, which was not resolved until mid-March with the nomination of Hani Qawasmi, an independent with little experience in security matters.²⁶ Mr Qawasmi faced the challenging task of reconciling and integrating the rival paramilitary security forces set up by Fatah and Hamas and ending the months of factional fighting.

Hamas officials urged Western governments to accept the new unity government, but ruled out explicit recognition of Israel. Israel said it would maintain its boycott in protest at the absence of recognition. The United States and the European Union indicated they would not recognise the new Government, but would judge it on its actions and maintain contacts with non-Hamas ministers.

²⁴ The Arab League summit of 2002 offered Israel full peace and recognition in return for a withdrawal to the 1967 borders, the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, and a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue. The full text of the Arab League Declaration can be found in a Press Release from the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Information Office, Washington DC, 28 March 2002, http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRN/docs/beirut_declaration.html

²⁵ As translated by Associated Press.

²⁶ For profiles of the main ministers, see [BBC News website](#), 20 March 2007

III The seizure of Gaza

In the event, hopes that the Mecca Accord would calm factional tensions proved short-lived. Disputes between the two parties re-emerged in March 2007 when President Abbas appointed Mohammad Dahlan as head of a reconstituted Palestinian National Security Council, in an attempt to exert control over the various Palestinian security forces. Hamas officials denounced the move and criticised the President for the appointment of such a divisive figure. Mr Dahlan headed the Fatah-dominated Preventive Security Force during the 1990s and oversaw a crack-down on militant groups in Gaza, detaining thousands of Hamas members and allegedly torturing and killing several of them.²⁷ Furthermore, Hamas members accused Mr Dahlan of ordering the December 2006 assassination attempt on Mr Haniya and of orchestrating much of the violence in Gaza. Mr Dahlan's close ties with Washington and his past cooperation with the CIA and Israel's security forces were seen by many in Hamas as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Some observers subsequently suggested Mr Dahlan had been appointed as a result of pressure from Washington and in spite of reservations on the part of Mr Abbas.²⁸

There have been a number of reports since Hamas came to power in early 2006 that key officials in the Bush administration (primarily Deputy National Security Adviser, Elliot Abrams, acting, it is alleged, with the support of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice) have been seeking to build up Fatah and the PA's security institutions with the aim of defeating Hamas and removing it from power. Those reports suggested the programme had encountered resistance from the CIA, the Pentagon and from Israeli officials, who feared it would precipitate a Palestinian civil war and prove counter-productive as it would bolster support for Hamas.²⁹

Aspects of the US programme to support the PA's security institutions are publicly documented. The declared aim of the programme, which dates back to the election of Mr Abbas in 2005, has been to rebuild the PA's ability to meet its obligations under the Quartet Roadmap of 2003 to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure that has been responsible for attacks on Israel. Headed by the US Security Coordinator Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, the US programme was stepped up in the spring of 2007 with the allocation of \$59 million by Congress to improve security at the Karni crossing point between Gaza and Egypt, and to provide training and non-lethal equipment to the Palestinian Presidential Guard and to the President's Office of National Security.³⁰ Presidential Guard members have received training in Egypt and Israeli officials said that, at the request of the US, the force was equipped with light weapons by both Egypt

²⁷ 'June amazed them', *The Economist*, 23 June 2007

²⁸ Hamas Legislative Council member, Mohamed Shihab, claimed: "These groups are a cancer that is going to destroy Fatah too. They are Mohamed Dahlan, Rashid Abu Shbak and their supporters, who are forming death squads. Abbas did not want to select Dahlan, but the United States and Israel forced him to." Quoted in "Hamastan? An experiment in Palestinian power-sharing heads for failure", *Financial Times*, 28 May 2007

²⁹ See for example, '[Elliot Abrams' uncivil war](#)', *Conflicts Forum website*, 7 January 2007.

³⁰ For more detail, see '[Remarks by U.S. Security Coordinator LTG Keith Dayton: Update on the Israeli-Palestinian Situation and Palestinian Assistance Programs](#)', House Foreign Affairs Middle East and South Asia Sub-Committee, 23 May 2007

and Jordan.³¹ The Bush administration insists it has not provided weapons directly to the PA, contradicting Hamas's claims to the contrary.

EU assistance had been provided to the Palestinian police force as part of the COPP (the Coordinating Committee for International Assistance to the Palestinian Police Force) programme. The assistance, which was expanded in 2005 with the deployment of 30 to 50 experts to advise senior police officials and increased investment in new radio communications facilities, patrol cars and infrastructure, was subsequently suspended after Hamas came to power in early 2006.

The prospects for an end to the violence in Gaza diminished further when in April 2007 the new Interior Minister offered to resign in frustration at his lack of authority over the various militias and security forces. He was initially persuaded to stay on, but his resignation was eventually accepted on 14 May after the failure of successive cease-fires and the resumption of heavy fighting in Gaza. He said he had not been given the necessary backing by the parties to fulfil his role, although many observers pinned the blame on Mr Dahlan and Fatah for refusing to place their forces under his control.³² Prime Minister Haniya assumed the role as an interim measure.

As the fighting in Gaza escalated during May 2007, it became apparent that Fatah forces had lost the military initiative to Hamas, prompting warnings from US and Israeli officials that Hamas would soon be in a position to take complete control of the territory.³³ Intra-Fatah rivalries were reported to be leading some Fatah forces to switch their allegiance to Hamas. In an attempt to redress the military balance, Israel gave permission in mid-May for around 500 Fatah fighters from the Presidential Guard to cross into Gaza from Egypt, where they had been receiving training. Despite some local successes, Fatah units in Gaza became increasingly unable to coordinate their operations due to the fragmentation of their command structure and the absence of key leaders. Mohammed Dahlan was in Egypt receiving medical treatment and only returned to the West Bank after Gaza had fallen, while other leading figures such as Rashid Abu Shbak, the President's head of internal security (effectively Fatah's shadow interior minister), were also absent.

The decisive move by Hamas began on 11 June 2007 and by the following day much of central and northern Gaza was reported to be under its control. Fatah announced the suspension of its participation in the National Unity Government in protest at the seizure of a number of Fatah-controlled security posts, saying it would resume participation only once a ceasefire had been put in place. By 14 June Fatah's situation in Gaza had deteriorated sharply as Hamas fighters seized the headquarters of Fatah's Preventive Security Force and the presidential compound in Gaza City. Fighting spread to the south, with Hamas gaining control of Rafah that same day. An order from President

³¹ Reports suggest that Israel refused to sanction the delivery of heavier weaponry, such as heavy machine guns. See Ze'ev Schiff, ['Israel to let Presidential Guard train near West Bank city of Jericho'](#), Ha'aretz newspaper (Israel), 24 May 2007

³² See for example, Harvey Morris, 'Jihadistan?', *Financial Times*, 27 May 2007

³³ See for example, ['Remarks by U.S. Security Coordinator LTG Keith Dayton: Update on the Israeli-Palestinian Situation and Palestinian Assistance Programs'](#), House Foreign Affairs Middle East and South Asia Sub-Committee, 23 May 2007

Abbas for the Presidential Guard to counterattack against Hamas, instead of maintaining its hitherto defensive posture, was widely seen as coming too late to affect the course of the fighting.

Hamas fighters posed for photos in the offices of the Preventive Security Force and of President Abbas, expressing their contempt for what they viewed as agents of collaboration with the Israeli occupation. Hamas members claimed they had taken possession of sensitive PA intelligence files that revealed the extent of Fatah's "collaboration" with Israel's internal security service, the Shin Bet (or Shabak) and with foreign intelligence agencies, such as the CIA.³⁴

There were reports of reprisals carried out against captured Fatah members, some of whom were executed in the street or thrown to their death off roofs. A number of Hamas members were arrested by PA security forces in the West Bank in retaliation and some were reported to have fled or gone into hiding. Members of the Fatah-affiliated Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades reportedly seized a number of Hamas members and conducted summary executions of their own.

The brutality of some of the actions of Hamas fighters may point to a weakening of discipline. The small, tight-knit military wing of the past has not only been reduced by Israeli action, but also diluted by the co-option and integration of other militias as part of the expansion of the Executive Force, resulting in the incorporation of less-disciplined elements into the organisation and perhaps making it harder for the political leadership to exert control. Furthermore, the military wing of Hamas appears to believe that the balance of power is shifting in Hamas's favour and there have been persistent reports of friction with the movement's generally more cautious and pragmatic political leadership.³⁵

Officials from Hamas's political wing claimed the operations had been directed against a limited number of renegade Fatah units that had fomented the tension and unrest in previous months, rather than against Fatah as a whole. The head of Hamas's Political Bureau, Khaled Meshaal, insisted the movement had been left with no option but to use force to end the fighting in Gaza:

The lack of security drove the crisis toward explosion. What happened in Gaza was a necessary step. The people were suffering from chaos and lack of security and this treatment was needed.³⁶

Anthony Cordesman of the US Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded that Hamas had been successful in co-opting or persuading some Fatah elements not to intervene, commenting that:

There are indications that the younger members of Fatah's security forces turned on their leaders or simply stood aside - seeing the older "Tunisians in Gaza" [i.e.

³⁴ *Israel News*, 14 June 2007

³⁵ Zaki Chehab, 'The new pariah state', *New Statesman*, 21 June 2007

³⁶ *Al Jazeera.net*, 16 June 2007

the older PLO leadership around Arafat that had been exiled to Tunisia during the 1980s] as corrupt, brutal, and ineffective.³⁷

There were reports that some of the senior Fatah commanders in Gaza had fled the territory with the assistance of Israel,³⁸ while the allegations of extensive US assistance to the Presidential Guard were cited by Hamas as evidence of a US-Israeli conspiracy to remove it from power. Ahmed Yousef, a Hamas spokesman, said the actions his movement had taken in Gaza had been "precipitated by the American and Israeli policy of arming elements of the Fatah opposition who want to attack Hamas and force us from office".³⁹

Several Western commentators concluded that Hamas felt compelled to act when it did due to its frustrations that the Mecca Accord had failed to bring the expected benefits and its concerns that US-backed efforts to undermine its hold on power were gathering momentum. Jonathan Steele of the *Guardian* claimed on 22 June 2007 that:

Documents doing the rounds in the Middle East purport to have evidence for [US Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott] Abrams's "hard coup" strategy. One text recounts Washington's objectives as expressed in US officials' conversations with an Arab government. These are, among others, "to maintain President Abbas and Fatah as the centre of gravity on the Palestinian scene", "avoid wasting time in accommodating Hamas's ideological conditions", "undermine Hamas's political status through providing for Palestinian economic needs", and "strengthen the Palestinian president's authority to be able to call and conduct early elections by autumn 2007".

The document is dated March 2, less than a month after Saudi Arabia brokered the Mecca agreement under which Abbas finally agreed with Hamas on a unity government. The deal upset the Israelis and Washington because it left Hamas's prime minister Ismail Haniyeh in charge. The document suggests the US wanted to sabotage it. Certainly, according to Hamas officials whom a depressed Abbas later briefed, Abbas was told to scrap Mecca at every subsequent meeting he has had with Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert or with US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and Abrams.

Most ominously, the document of US objectives outlined a \$1.27bn programme that would add seven special battalions, totalling 4,700 men, to the 15,000 Abbas already has in his presidential guard and other security forces, which were also to be given extra training and arms. "The desired outcome will be the transformation of Palestinian security forces and provide for the president of the Palestinian Authority to be able to safeguard decisions such as dismissing the cabinet and forming an emergency cabinet," the document says.⁴⁰

³⁷ Anthony Cordesman, '[The Strategic Implications of the Palestinian Crisis](#)', *CSIS website*, 18 June 2007

³⁸ *Ha'aretz*, 17 June 2007

³⁹ Jonathan Steele, 'Hamas acted on a very real fear of a US-sponsored coup', *Guardian*, 22 June 2007

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

A. Formation of the Emergency Government

On 14 June 2007 President Abbas responded to the events in Gaza by dismissing Prime Minister Haniya and the National Unity Government. He announced the formation of a new Emergency Government with former finance minister, Salam Fayyad, as Prime Minister. The remainder of the cabinet was composed of mainly independents and technocrats.⁴¹ Only the sensitive post of Interior Minister was given to a Fatah loyalist, Abdel Razak Yehiyeh. The new Government was sworn in on 17 June.

President Abbas issued executive orders enabling the new Prime Minister to govern without parliamentary approval and outlawing the militias of Hamas, including the Executive Force and the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. He subsequently accused Hamas of mounting a coup attempt, claiming he had evidence that the movement had been planning to assassinate him during a visit to Gaza in May. He warned: "There is no dialogue with those murderous terrorists".⁴²

On 21 June the executive of the Fatah-dominated PLO expressed its support for the new Emergency Government and called for the dissolution of all militias outside the official security forces. That position was formalised in a further presidential decree on 26 June, which declared that: "All armed militias, groups and brigades that do not belong in practice to the security services shall be treated as illegal organisations."⁴³ It also called on the security services to confiscate guns, explosives and other weapons that had been smuggled into the Palestinian Territories in recent years. The move drew warnings from the Fatah-affiliated Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades that no weapons would be surrendered while Hamas posed a threat and while the Israeli occupation remained in place.

Observers expressed doubts about the PA's ability to enforce its writ, due to the weakness of the security forces and the large number of well-armed and powerful clan-based militias that have emerged in recent years. Reports suggested that President Abbas had asked Israel to permit the return to the West Bank of the 1,500 strong Jordanian-based Palestinian Badr Brigade to strengthen his forces.⁴⁴

Marwan Barghouti, the Fatah leader held in Israeli jail, welcomed the formation of the Emergency Government, but stressed the importance of major reforms within Fatah, including the sacking of senior commanders who had responsibility for Gaza. One leading Fatah commander, Rashid Abu Shbak, was stripped of his role as director of internal security, following criticism of the failures in Gaza. However, on 18 June it was announced that Mohammed Dahlan had been reappointed as head of the National Security Council by Mr Abbas, despite concerns from some Fatah members.

The detention of dozens of Hamas members by PA security forces, which follows a series of detentions of senior Hamas officials and MPs by Israel since mid-2006, prompted accusations from Hamas that Fatah was mounting a coup in the West Bank

⁴¹ For a list of the new cabinet members, see ['Profiles: Palestinian interim cabinet'](#), *BBC News Online*, 17 June 2007

⁴² *Ha'aretz*, 21 June 2007

⁴³ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 June 2007

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

against the democratically elected government. Hamas also rejected the formation of an Emergency Government as an illegal act, saying the new cabinet did not reflect the Palestinian national consensus. Mr Haniya, who refused to accept his dismissal as Prime Minister, said the movement would not be seeking the establishment of a rival government in Gaza, arguing that: "Gaza belongs to all the Palestinian people and not just Hamas. Separation is not on the agenda and never will be."⁴⁵ Mr Meshal said he supported Arab League efforts to bring about a return to political dialogue to address the schism between the two parties, despite comments from Fatah officials close to Mr Abbas that they would not enter negotiations with "killers".⁴⁶

On 29 June Mr Abbas said he would support the deployment of international forces into Gaza to provide security for the early parliamentary and presidential elections he was planning to call in the coming months. The proposal for an international presence was rejected by the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, which said in a statement that: "We will only receive these forces with shells and rockets."⁴⁷

B. Reaction

1. Israeli response

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said on 18 June that the new situation offered "opportunities", adding that the strategy of both Israel and "the world" was "to weaken the extremists, not to give legitimacy to the extremists, and to build a genuine alternative to Hamas with the moderates."⁴⁸ Prime Minister Olmert said at a meeting with President Bush on 19 June that Israel would support President Abbas and the Emergency Government, saying he believed the developments offered an opportunity for progress.⁴⁹

On 24 June the Israeli cabinet announced that the transfer of tax revenues to the PA would resume.⁵⁰ The customs and VAT revenues, which Israel collects on behalf of the Palestinians, account for around 50% of the PA's budget and their release will allow the PA to pay its employees after a prolonged hiatus since Hamas came to power in early 2006. An initial transfer of \$117 million took place on 1 July and Israel said further payments would follow within days and weeks, if President Abbas could demonstrate progress towards disarming militia groups and if his political standing showed signs of improvement.⁵¹ Palestinian officials expressed disappointment that not all the funds had been released. There were also reports of disputes over the exact amount of revenue held by Israel. According to the PA, the amount had reached \$700 million. Israel put the

⁴⁵ *Al Jazeera.net*, 16 June 2007

⁴⁶ 'Abbas rules out dialogue with Hamas 'killers'', *Reuters*, 20 June 2007

⁴⁷ 'IDF chief to Knesset: Abbas, Meshal will form union in time', *Ha'aretz*, 04 July 2007

⁴⁸ [Press statement](#) by FM Livni at the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 18 June 2007

⁴⁹ US State Department [press release](#), 18 June 2007

⁵⁰ For background on the political situation in Israel, see House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/IA/4359, *Israel: internal political developments and relations with Syria and the Palestinians*, 9 June 2007

⁵¹ Israeli [Cabinet Communiqué](#), 24 June 2007. In accordance with the provisions of the Oslo Accords, Israel collects customs and VAT revenue on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, although those funds have been frozen by Israel on a number of occasions in protest at the PA's perceived failure to meet its obligations in fighting terrorism.

figure are around \$500 million, saying that only around \$300-\$400 million could be transferred at the present time as a court order had frozen some money to cover Palestinian debts.

Mr Olmert announced further steps at a summit meeting on 25 June in Egypt involving President Abbas, Prime Minister Olmert, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and King Abdullah of Jordan:

As a gesture of good will towards, and given the importance of the prisoner issue I decided today to present to the Israeli government at its upcoming meeting and a proposal to release approximately 250 prisoners who are members of Fatah, who do not have blood on their hands, with their commitment not to involve themselves again in terror. It is important for every Palestinian to understand that we are extending a hand to those who are willing to have peace and reconciliation with us. There is no other solution than two states living in peace and security.⁵²

He also said that, at the request of Mr Abbas, Israel would continue to provide the population of Gaza with electricity, water, medical services, food and medications in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis.

Calls from Mr Abbas for the talks to include discussion of the so-called 'final status' issues, including Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugees and the borders of a future Palestinian state, were resisted by Mr Olmert, although Israeli officials said they would be willing to discuss a "political horizon" with the Palestinians, with a view to establishing the necessary groundwork for a resumption of final status talks.⁵³

2. Regional response

The response from neighbouring Arab states to the takeover of Gaza by Hamas was largely critical in tone, although there was also widespread condemnation of both sides for the months of factional violence that had preceded it. The Saudi Government, which had brokered the Mecca Accord in February, repeatedly urged an end to the fighting and a return to dialogue, warning that the tensions were damaging the Palestinian cause.⁵⁴ King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia warned on 27 June that:

The current situation cannot continue as it is because this will serve the one that is usurping the Palestinian land and severely harming the just Palestinian cause. It may shatter hopes for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with holy Jerusalem as its capital.⁵⁵

Saudi officials expressed their frustration at the collapse of the Mecca Accord, saying they would not participate alone in future attempts to broker a solution between Hamas and Fatah.

⁵² ['Statement by PM Ehud Olmert at the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit'](#), Israeli Foreign Ministry policy statement, 25 June 2007

⁵³ *Ha'aretz*, 24 June 2007

⁵⁴ ['Prince Saud Al-Faisal delivers speech'](#), Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement, 15 June 2007

⁵⁵ 'Saudi Arabia is not vying for regional role – king', *Al Ra'y*, 27 June 2007 (reported by *BBC Monitoring*)

There was support from the Arab League for the “Palestinian legitimacy represented by President Abbas” and for the new Emergency Government, although it also called for a revival of negotiations and cooperation between Hamas and Fatah and for measures to be taken to prevent the isolation of Gaza and to avert a humanitarian crisis there. The League had previously announced the establishment of a fact-finding commission to investigate the rupture in relations between the rival Palestinian factions, despite reports that Mr Abbas was opposed to the move as an intervention into Palestinian internal affairs.⁵⁶

Iran, which provides extensive financial, political and (some claim) military support to Hamas, was the main critic of the dissolution of the National Unity Government, believing that the measures to undermine the Haniya Government would not help the Palestinians and would only serve to further the interests of Israel.⁵⁷ A foreign ministry spokesman warned that:

Iran has always been against civil war, believing that it is harmful to the cause of Palestinian revolution. We believe that Palestinian groups should close their ranks and launch joint campaign against the Zionist enemy to end occupation of their homeland and vindicate all their denied rights.⁵⁸

Iranian officials said the formation of the Emergency Government and the exclusion of Hamas, despite its position as the largest party in parliament, was against democratic principles and norms.

Attention also focused on Syria, given its role in hosting the Hamas Political Bureau. However, there was little comment from Damascus beyond an expression of regret at the hostilities between Hamas and Fatah and a call for unity in the face of the “Israeli siege and aggression”.⁵⁹ Some suggested the Syrian leadership was anxious to avoid antagonising the United States and the international community at a time when it was seeking a revival of peace talks with Israel and was facing pressure over its role in Lebanon and the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

The largest Muslim nation in the world, Indonesia, stressed the need for reconciliation between the two factions as the only route to the goal of a Palestinian state, and called for Hamas to be included in the political process. Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda said that “People may not like Hamas, but it exists as a political power and can't be nullified”.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Gulf News.com*, 17 June 2007, and *Associated Press*, 19 June 2007

⁵⁷ ‘Bush, Olmert to Discuss Middle East’, *Saudi Press Agency*, 20 June 2007

⁵⁸ ‘Iran urges Palestinian factions to get united’, *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 16 June 2007

⁵⁹ ‘A message to President al-Assad from President Abbas received by al-Shara’, *SANA News Agency*, 17 June 2007

⁶⁰ “Indonesia warns of excluding Hamas”, *Jakarta Post*, 28 June 2007

3. International response

There was strong international condemnation of the violence in Gaza and declarations of support from the US and EU for the measures taken by President Abbas to form a new Emergency Government. The Bush administration said it would remove restrictions on aid and support to the new government, although Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stressed that the US would not leave the population of Gaza “at the mercy of terrorist organisations” and promised a \$40 million contribution to the United Nations relief programme in Gaza.⁶¹

President Bush subsequently suggested the situation represented “an exciting moment”, saying his administration hoped that President Abbas would be strengthened to the point where he could lead the Palestinians “in a different direction”.⁶²

On 15 June the then British Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett, commented:

Today's announcement that the National Unity Government has come to an end is of course a matter for regret. The Mecca Agreement and subsequent formation of the NUG seemed to be positive steps forward. But once again, extremists carrying guns have prevented progress against the wishes of the majority who seek a peaceful two-state solution.

The current violence in Gaza and the West Bank remains deeply alarming and I again call on all parties to agree an immediate ceasefire, for the sake of the Palestinian people. It is imperative that all sides agree to speak to each other. Dialogue is the only way to achieve a long lasting and sustainable peace.⁶³

Speaking on 18 June 2007, the Minister of State for the Middle East, Kim Howells, pledged the UK's support for President Abbas, saying that:

The emergency Government, who were sworn in on 17 June, have our full support. We will continue to work with all those, including President Abbas, who are dedicated to achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The emergency Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, has said that his priorities are restoring security and improving the economic and humanitarian situation, and we share those goals.⁶⁴

He also stressed the need to provide for the humanitarian needs of the population of Gaza.

On 18 June EU foreign ministers “condemned in the strongest possible terms the violent coup perpetrated by Hamas militias”, and expressed their

full support for President Abbas and his decisions taken within his mandate to declare a state of emergency and to install an emergency government for the

⁶¹ State Department press briefing, 18 June 2007

⁶² *Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2006

⁶³ ‘State of emergency in the occupied Palestinian territories’, [FCO statement](#), 14 June 2007

⁶⁴ HC Deb 18 June 2007, c1075

Palestinian Territories under Prime Minister Fayyad, underlining the importance of the Palestinian basic law.⁶⁵

The Council decided to resume normal contacts with the Palestinian Authority immediately:

With this objective, the EU will develop the conditions for urgent practical and financial assistance including direct financial support to the government; support to the Palestinian Civilian Police through the resumption of the EUPOL COPPS mission; the resumption of the activities of the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) Rafah; and intensive efforts to build the institutions of the future Palestinian state.⁶⁶

The Council also vowed to maintain aid to Gaza, extending for three months the Temporary International Mechanism by which aid has been channelled to Palestinians despite the boycott of Hamas.⁶⁷

4. Response of the Quartet

Representatives of the Middle East Quartet, which is made up of the United States, the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United Nations, met in Jerusalem on 26 June. A statement was issued the following day:

Quartet Principals noted that recent events in Gaza and the West Bank make it more urgent than ever that we advance the search for peace in the Middle East.

The Quartet reaffirms its objective to promote an end to the conflict in conformity with the roadmap and expresses its intention to redouble its efforts in that regard.

The urgency of recent events has reinforced the need for the international community, bearing in mind the obligations of the parties, to help Palestinians as they build the institutions and economy of a viable state in Gaza and the West Bank, able to take its place as a peaceful and prosperous partner to Israel and its other neighbours.⁶⁸

5. Appointment of Mr Blair as Quartet representative

The Quartet went on to announce the appointment of the outgoing British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, as the Quartet representative. The post had previously been held by the former President of the World Bank, Australian-born James Wolfensohn, who resigned in April 2006 after less than a year in the post, in frustration at the lack of progress.

⁶⁵ 'Provisional results of the General Affairs and External Relations Council', Council of the EU [Press release](#), 18 June 2006

⁶⁶ "Provisional results of the General Affairs and External Relations Council", 18 June 2006. Ibid.

⁶⁷ For more detail on the TIM and the provision of aid to Gaza, see House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/EP/4382, *UK aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories*.

⁶⁸ '[Full text: Quartet statement](#)', BBC News Online, 27 June 2007

The statement set out Mr Blair's role as follows, saying he would:

- mobilise international assistance to the Palestinians, working closely with donors and existing coordination bodies
- help to identify, and secure appropriate international support in addressing the institutional governance needs of the Palestinian state, focusing as a matter of urgency on the rule of law
- develop plans to promote Palestinian economic development, including private sector partnerships, building on previously agreed frameworks, especially concerning access and movement
- and liaise with other countries as appropriate in support of the agreed Quartet objectives

It went on:

As representative, Tony Blair will bring continuity and intensity of focus to the work of the Quartet in support of the Palestinians, within the broader framework of the Quartet's efforts to promote an end to the conflict in conformity with the roadmap.

He will spend significant time in the region working with the parties and others to help create viable and lasting government institutions representing all Palestinians, a robust economy, and a climate of law and order for the Palestinian people.

Tony Blair will be supported in this work by a small team of experts, based in Jerusalem, to be seconded by partner countries and institutions.

The Quartet representative will report to and consult regularly with the Quartet and be guided by it as necessary.⁶⁹

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert welcomed the appointment, saying he believed that Mr Blair could have a favourable impact. The Israeli Foreign Ministry said in a statement:

Mr Blair is very well regarded by the leaders in the region. His experience, knowledge and abilities will surely advance the important processes set out as goals by the Quartet.⁷⁰

President Abbas said Mr Blair had given him "the assurance that he will work to arrive at a peaceful solution on the basis of two states."⁷¹ However, Hamas spokesman Ghazi Hamad expressed concerns, claiming that Mr Blair had constantly adopted "the American and the Israeli position":

According to our experience at the time he was the prime minister of Britain... he was not honest and was not helpful in solving the conflict in the Middle East.⁷²

⁶⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6247246.stm

⁷⁰ 'Israeli FM congratulates Blair on Mideast job', *Agence France Presse*, 28 June 2007

⁷¹ BBC News Online, 28 June 2007

⁷² 'Hamas criticises Blair envoy move', BBC News Online, 28 June 2007

Some analysts suggested that, although pro-western Arab leaders had supported the appointment in public, there was a deep ground-swell of popular resentment in the region against Mr Blair for his role in Iraq and his support for Israel during the conflict in Lebanon in mid-2006.⁷³ Furthermore, some Arab commentators said the role would be largely irrelevant, particularly if it was restricted to institution-building and economic development at a time when there was effectively a geographical and political separation between the West Bank and Gaza. Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, said that the Palestinians did not need help building institutions and questioned whether Mr Blair would have much impact:

Is he going to be listened to? Are his comments going to be respected? Can he really intervene? [...] We need third party involvement to achieve peace, to curb Israeli measures, to end the occupation and to build a state.⁷⁴

The incoming British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was said to have been concerned that the appointment could interfere with his own plans for using economic development as a means of pushing forward the peace process. A minister close to Brown was quoted as saying, "There is nothing we can do about it. It was pushed by Bush and we have to accept it."⁷⁵

Several EU and Russian officials also expressed some scepticism. The German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, said on 27 June that Mr Blair's nomination had been proposed and discussed "outside the context of the Quartet, so it is natural that this does not appeal to the membership of the Quartet". He went on to emphasise that Mr Blair should not undermine the role of Javier Solana, EU High Representative, by saying that "Mr Solana is a member of the Quartet while Mr Blair will be working for the Quartet."⁷⁶ It was reported that the Russian envoy at the Quartet's Jerusalem meeting would not give his approval to the appointment and sought further consultation with Russian foreign minister Sergei Ivanov before accepting it.⁷⁷

⁷³ For details on the conflict in Lebanon and the position adopted by the British Government, see House of Commons Library Research Paper RP 07/08, *The crisis in Lebanon*, 19 January 2007

⁷⁴ *Guardian*, 28 June 2007

⁷⁵ 'Blair's Middle East role tainted by associations with Bush, say critics', *Independent*, 28 June 2007

⁷⁶ 'Mideast role raises hackles in Berlin', *Financial Times*, 28 June 2007

⁷⁷ 'Russians withhold approval of Blair envoy role', *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 June 2007

IV Implications and prospects

A. 'West Bank First'?

The implications of the events of June 2007 for the moribund peace process are difficult to discern at present. One popular theory is that the fall of Gaza opens the way for what has been called a 'West Bank First' approach. The international community would inject considerable sums of money into the West Bank, promote reform of the PA and of Fatah, help to rebuild Fatah's security forces and encourage Israel to engage in meaningful final status talks. The progress made in the West Bank would contrast strongly with the privations of Hamas-controlled Gaza, leading the Palestinian people to rally around Fatah.

Writing on 15 June 2007, Gershon Baskin of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), a think tank that advocates peaceful solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, argued that:

With every crisis there are usually new opportunities and those must be investigated and pursued, if possible. Gaza is lost, for the time being and there is little that the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah can do to immediately change the course of events. The present focus must now be on the West Bank and on saving the Palestinian people from additional unnecessary disasters and nightmares. There is now an opportunity to contrast the horrors of Gaza with a new reality in the West Bank that could serve as an example and focal point for positive Palestinian energies.⁷⁸

He called on the new Palestinian leadership to issue a ten-point plan, which would include moves to reassure Israel on the renunciation of terrorism, recognition of the Israeli state, adherence to existing agreements and the ending of anti-Israeli incitement in the Palestinian media. He suggested that the Palestinian leadership should call for an immediate resumption of final status negotiations, with the intention of establishing an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Furthermore, he called for fresh elections to be held in the West Bank and East Jerusalem within 3 months, with participation restricted to only those parties that recognised Israel, adhered to previous agreements, supported democracy and renounced violence. With regard to the security situation, Baskin advocated the adoption of a plan to unite all Palestinian security forces into one force under direct command of the political leadership and for all unauthorised groups to be disarmed.

In return, he said Israel should release tax revenues and prisoners, restore full diplomatic relations, support final status talks, and take measures to remove checkpoints and closures throughout the West Bank. He concluded:

The alternative to the above proposal is only more disasters and suffering for all Palestinians and for all Israelis. The recent events are far from the best scenario and from a Palestinian perspective represent a colossal tragedy. The Palestinian

⁷⁸ Gershon Baskin, ['The fall of Gaza and the rise of Palestine'](#), Arabic Media Internet Network, 15 June 2007

leadership has reached a new crossroad – and they must make a choice in which direction to lead. There are always more than two alternatives, but those alternatives lead either in the direction of hope and peace or towards more despair and suffering. Leadership is about making tough decisions. Crises provide opportunities for real change and this is the time for change.

As Baskin acknowledged, there are risks in adopting a 'West Bank First' approach, and some argue it may be founded on false assumptions. Robert Malley, a former adviser to President Clinton on Arab-Israeli Affairs who currently works for the International Crisis Group, acknowledged in an article with Aaron David Miller of 19 June 2007 that it appeared compelling at a superficial level, but warned that:

The theory is a few years late and several steps removed from reality. If the United States wanted to help President Mahmoud Abbas, the time to do so was in 2005, when he won office in a landslide, emerged as the Palestinians' uncontested leader and was in a position to sell difficult compromises to his people. Today, Abbas is challenged by far more Palestinians and is far less capable of securing a consensus on any important decision. [...]

"West Bank first" also relies on the notion that Abbas -- or any other Palestinian leader -- can afford to concentrate on the West Bank at Gaza's expense. There is raw anger among Palestinians. But once the dust settles, Abbas will want to be viewed as president of all Palestinians, not of a geographic or political segment of them. For him to accept funds that can be spent only on the West Bank, or international dealings that exclude Gaza, would critically undercut his position as a symbol of the Palestinian nation.⁷⁹

Anthony Cordesman cautioned in an article on 18 June that:

A West Bank mini "state" [...] is scarcely likely to offer the Palestinians real hope. A weak West Bank will have even more problems in dealing with Israel over issues like the settlements, the "wall," and Jerusalem. It can only be economically viable if tied closely to Israel with links to Jordan, but such ties require a level of security that may be impossible for the Palestinian Authority to create, particularly given Hamas and PIJ infiltration into the West Bank, and their ability to conduct spoiler operations from the West Bank against Israel (or Jordan).⁸⁰

A second false assumption may be to overestimate the strength of Fatah in the West Bank. Robert Malley and Aaron David Miller warned that:

unlike Hamas, Fatah has ceased to exist as an ideologically or organizationally coherent movement. Behind the brand name lie a multitude of offshoots, fiefdoms and personal interests. Most attacks against Israel since the elections were launched by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the unruly Fatah-affiliated militias, notwithstanding Abbas's repeated calls for them to stop.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Robert Malley and Aaron David Miller, "West Bank First: It Won't Work", *Washington Post*, 19 July 2007

⁸⁰ Anthony Cordesman, ['The Strategic Implications of the Palestinian Crisis'](#), *CSIS website*, 18 June 2007

⁸¹ Robert Malley and Aaron David Miller, "West Bank First: It Won't Work", *Washington Post*, 19 July 2007

Hamas is far from weak in the West Bank and, although Fatah is stronger militarily (on paper at least), the Islamists retain considerable political support, as witnessed by their successes in the 2006 parliamentary elections when they performed strongly in the main cities of the West Bank, winning around 30 seats to Fatah's 12. Israeli officials have suggested that it is not the PA that is preventing Hamas from establishing a strong military capability in the West Bank, but rather the presence of IDF forces and the Israeli security service, Shin Bet.⁸²

A further factor to consider with regard to a possible revival of peace negotiations with Israel is security. Malley and Miller argue that:

it takes only a few militants to conduct attacks against Israel and few such attacks to provoke an Israeli military reaction. If Hamas is convinced that there is an effort to strangle its rule, it is likely to resume violence against Israel -- either directly or through one of many militant groups, Fatah offshoots included. There will be no shortage of militants angry at Fatah leaders' dealings with Israel or hungry for cash. If such violence occurs, hope for progress in the West Bank will come crashing down.⁸³

Some believe there is a risk that the PA may disintegrate as a viable political actor, given the proliferation of rival clan-based militias and criminal networks, the fragmentation of Fatah, and the difficulty encountered by the PA in enforcing its authority on the West Bank. Cordesman argued that if the new government established by President Abbas was a prelude to effective governance, it could be serious step forward, but warned that:

if the Palestinian Authority reverts to form, it may lose the West Bank. Furthermore, if the Palestinian Authority should fail in the West Bank, the security consequences for both Israel and Jordan would be far worse. A radicalized Palestinian entity with no hope in peace, no real ties to moderate Arab governments, and no economic options would have little to lose in waging any kind of asymmetric struggle it could conceive of.⁸⁴

A report in *The Times* commented that:

Some Palestinian analysts predict that a collapse of the Palestinian Authority would pave the way for Jordanian custodial rule in the West Bank and a similar arrangement for Egypt in Gaza. "The message is the Palestinians cannot rule themselves. This fighting will only end if a third party takes over," said Ibrahim Abrash, a political analyst in Gaza.⁸⁵

Such suggestions have been rejected by King Abdullah of Jordan, who said in late June: "We reject the formula of confederation and federation and we believe that proposing this issue at this specific period is a conspiracy against both Palestine and Jordan", although

⁸² 'IDF chief to Knesset: Abbas, Meshal will form union in time', *Ha'aretz*, 04 July 2007

⁸³ Robert Malley and Aaron David Miller, "West Bank First: It Won't Work", *Washington Post*, 19 July 2007

⁸⁴ Anthony Cordesman, '[The Strategic Implications of the Palestinian Crisis](#)', *CSIS website*, 18 June 2007

⁸⁵ "Gaza lurches towards civil war as leaders lose control of gunmen battling on street", *The Times*, 17 May 2007

he said such a confederation could be possible once an independent Palestinian state had been established.⁸⁶

B. Further conflict in Gaza?

The prospects for Gaza also remain uncertain. Hamas has taken early steps to enforce its authority in the territory and reports suggest that law and order has improved significantly since mid-June 2007. As of early July, one of the few remaining area of Gaza outside Hamas control was the territory controlled by the powerful Dagmouh (or Dogmush) clan just south of Gaza City. The clan, which was once allied to Fatah during the Arafat era and then to Hamas, reportedly switched its allegiance to the al-Qaeda leadership following the death of two clan members at the hands of Hamas in December 2006. A branch of the clan, operating under the name 'the Army of Islam', lay behind the kidnapping of the BBC reporter, Alan Johnston, in March 2007.⁸⁷ Hamas leaders denounced the move, saying in June they would use military force to free him. In the event, Mr Johnston was released on 4 July after Hamas security forces detained a number of the group's members and reportedly cut off water and electricity to the clan's area. Senior Hamas officials, including Ismael Haniya and former foreign minister Mahmoud Zahhar, played a leading role in securing his release, with Mr Zahhar saying it formed part of Hamas's efforts to extend security to all in Gaza "without fear".⁸⁸

However, as Cordesman notes, the movement will encounter a number of other challenges in establishing effective governance in Gaza:

Hamas will face major economic problems and could face invasion. World Bank and other studies made it extraordinarily doubtful that Gaza could ever develop and sustain a viable economy even during the period before the Israeli-Palestinian War began in 2000. Years of war and population growth have made things far worse. So has the cut off of substantial amounts of aid and revenues since Hamas's political victory. Hamas at best is likely to get enough money to create a hollow welfare state in Gaza, with no prospects for economic growth or dealing with the Gaza's high rate of population growth. Hamas faces probable trade restrictions, limits of port development of any kind, and reprisals in terms of power and water cuts for violence that spills over into Israel.⁸⁹

The prospects for securing the reopening of Gaza's borders with Israel and Egypt will depend in large part on Israel, which could retaliate against any cross-border rocket and mortar attacks from Gaza by halting trade and access. Therefore, Hamas will continue to face a balancing act between its responsibilities as the effective party of power on the one hand, and its inclination to engage in, or permit, military attacks on Israel. It may be inclined to seek compromise with Fatah, perhaps recognising that its relations with key states in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, will otherwise remain fragile. As of early July, Mr Abbas remained strongly opposed to reconciliation, although some doubt

⁸⁶ *Ha'aretz*, 1 July 2007

⁸⁷ See Zaki Chehab, 'The new pariah state', *New Statesman*, 21 June 2007, and 'On the spot: Dagmouh jumpy after Hamas threats', *The Times*, 25 June 2007

⁸⁸ *BBC News Online*, 4 July 2007

⁸⁹ Anthony Cordesman, '[The Strategic Implications of the Palestinian Crisis](#)', *CSIS website*, 18 June 2007

whether that position is sustainable in the longer-term, given the strength of Hamas and its undoubted position of influence within Palestinian society.

The takeover of Gaza by Hamas will also pose new security challenges for Israel as it attempts to isolate the territory and to provide security along its perimeter. Cordesman wrote that attempting to stem the flow of arms and men into Gaza would

possibly pin down more IDF and security forces along the border between Gaza and Egypt. It also, however, will reduce Israeli internal and outside pressures that sought to persuade Israel to relax its security restrictions on Gaza, deal with Hamas, and seek a comprehensive peace settlement. In fact, the end result may be to simplify Israel's security problems by creating a total wall or separation in the south, easing its ability to use money and utilities like water and power as leverage, and conduct targeted attacks in Gaza. A low-level asymmetric struggle will result, with fewer operational constraints on the IDF and on hostile Israeli action.⁹⁰

There have been suggestions that the new Israeli Defence Minister, Ehud Barak, may pursue a major offensive into Gaza in an attempt to reduce the military capabilities of Hamas and to reassert Israel's deterrent capacity following the IDF's poor performance in Lebanon during 2006.⁹¹ Whether such an incursion could achieve its objectives, or would merely radicalise the Gazan population further, remains a moot point, as does the question of whether the Israeli public has the appetite for sending troops back into Gaza in significant numbers just two years after Israel completed its unilateral withdrawal.

C. Death of the peace process?

In Israel a number of commentators have argued that the peace process is dead and that developments in Gaza form part of a broader battle against totalitarianism in the form of radical Islamists. Barry Rubin, the Director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center in Israel, argued in his article 'Hamastan' from 18 June 2007 that:

There are several key policy conclusions to be drawn from the Hamas triumph. First, Western and especially U.S. policy must get beyond an obsession with solving this conflict. It is going to go on for decades. Peace plans will go nowhere; Hamas will not be persuaded to moderate-- why should it when it expects victor at home and appeasement from Europe? Hamas is the enemy, just as much as al-Qaida, a part of the radical Islamist effort to seize control of the region, overthrow anything even vaguely moderate, and the expulsion of any Western influence.

Second, since Palestinian politics have clearly returned to the pre-1993 era, so must Western and U.S. policy. This means no Western aid and no diplomatic support for the Palestinians until their leaders change policies. The Palestinian movement can only earn financial help and political backing on that very distant

⁹⁰ Anthony Cordesman, '[The Strategic Implications of the Palestinian Crisis](#)', *CSIS website*, 18 June 2007

⁹¹ 'Israel plans attack on Gaza', *Sunday Times*, 17 June 2007

day when it accepts Israel's right to exist, stops endorsing and using terrorism, and is serious about negotiating a real, compromise two-state solution.

Third, it is time to support Israel proudly and fully. Now that it is clear Israel has done everything possible for peace -- taking great risks in doing so -- and has no such alternative, the rationale for Israel's behavior must be vindicated. The idea that even-handed, confidence-building behavior can broker peace is simply and fully, though regrettably, dead.

Beyond the specific issue, there are wider strategic implications for U.S. and Western interests in this dramatic, though predictable, development. The radical forces have gained a major new asset which will encourage the recruitment of new cadre. Iran, Syria, and Hizballah will grow more confident and aggressive.

It should be clearer than ever that we are now in the middle of the third great battle with totalitarianism in living memory. As with the struggles against fascism and communism, this conflict can only be won by a mobilization of Western resources and resolve. What has happened in the Gaza Strip -- though responsibility lies with the declining Arab nationalist radicals -- is a new lost battle in that process. There is not room for too many more such defeats.⁹²

D. The wider region: coming confrontations?

Further radicalisation of the Gazan population could result in growing support for the small, but increasing, number of militant Salafist groups, some with claimed links to the al-Qaeda network. Consequently, some observers contend that the West should reconsider its policy of imposing specific, and in their view unrealistic, preconditions on engagement with Hamas. They argue that the West compounded that error by encouraging Fatah to emasculate the former Hamas-led Government and to concentrate powers in the hands of the Presidency.

Alastair Crooke, writing in the *London Review of Books* on 28 June 2007, warned that the implications of the Western policy of isolating Hamas would have far-reaching consequences for the region. He wrote that the rank-and-file of Hamas and the wider Islamist movement had embarked on a period of introspection, with the result that

the mainstream Islamist strategy of pursuing an electoral path to reform is now being questioned. This will have an impact well beyond Palestine -- most obviously in Egypt and Jordan. Three events have triggered this reassessment: the sanctions imposed on the Hamas government; last summer's US-backed war to destroy Hizbullah in Lebanon; and the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which raises not a peep of protest from Europeans. Continued Western hostility towards all Islamists, however moderate their policies, has also frustrated the grass-roots.

At a conference held in Beirut in April, the senior Hamas official present, Usamah Hamadan, was strongly criticised by Fathi Yakan, the leader of Jamaat Islamiyah in Lebanon, for having embarked on the electoral route in the first place. Yakan pointed to the failure -- experienced by all Islamists without exception -- of those

⁹² Barry Rubin, '[Hamastan](#)', *GLORIA website*, 18 June 2007

who have participated in their national parliaments. No MP or deputy, from Islamabad to Cairo, or anywhere in between, has succeeded in bringing any significant change to their society.⁹³

He went on:

At issue in these discussions is whether moderate Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hizbullah will manage to retain their influence over this process of radicalisation; and whether they will survive as a cohesive, disciplined political bloc. Sunni Islamist movements are increasingly concerned at the spread of small Salafist groups that verge on the nihilistic in their disdain for political ideology and in their belief that to set fire to the remnants of colonial power is in itself enough to raise the revolutionary consciousness they hope for. Salafist groups are beginning to make inroads in Gaza, as they have already done in Iraq, Lebanon and North Africa.⁹⁴

Crooke noted that the consequences of recent developments were far from clear, but suggested that:

A return to the violent vanguardism of the 1960s and 1970s, detached from popular legitimacy and support, seems unlikely. More plausibly, moderate movements such as Hamas and Hizbullah will encourage popular resistance while also striving to maintain their political presence. Hamas's armed resistance in Gaza to what they perceive as a Western campaign to depose them is an example of the way an Islamist movement can satisfy a radicalised constituency increasingly angry at American interference in their societies in the interest of what Hassan Nasrallah has termed the 'Western project'.⁹⁵

He concluded:

Over the middle term it is possible to predict that a greater number of Palestinian citizens of Israel will become radicalised, as well as members of the Palestinian population as a whole. Israel's 'moderate' friends among Arab leaders may disappear. It may also encounter Islamists not only in the Palestinian government, but at the Jordanian and Egyptian frontiers; and conflict with Iran, were it to occur, might finish up by sweeping away many of the region's landmarks. [...]

We should hope – that may be all we can now do – that moderate Islamist movements manage to navigate these turbulent times, in spite of European attempts to prevent Islamism, which is clearly now the dominant regional current, from reshaping Middle Eastern societies. These attempts are opening space, not for the moderate pro-Western secularists whom Europeans seek to empower, but for those who believe that to build a new society you must first burn down the old one.⁹⁶

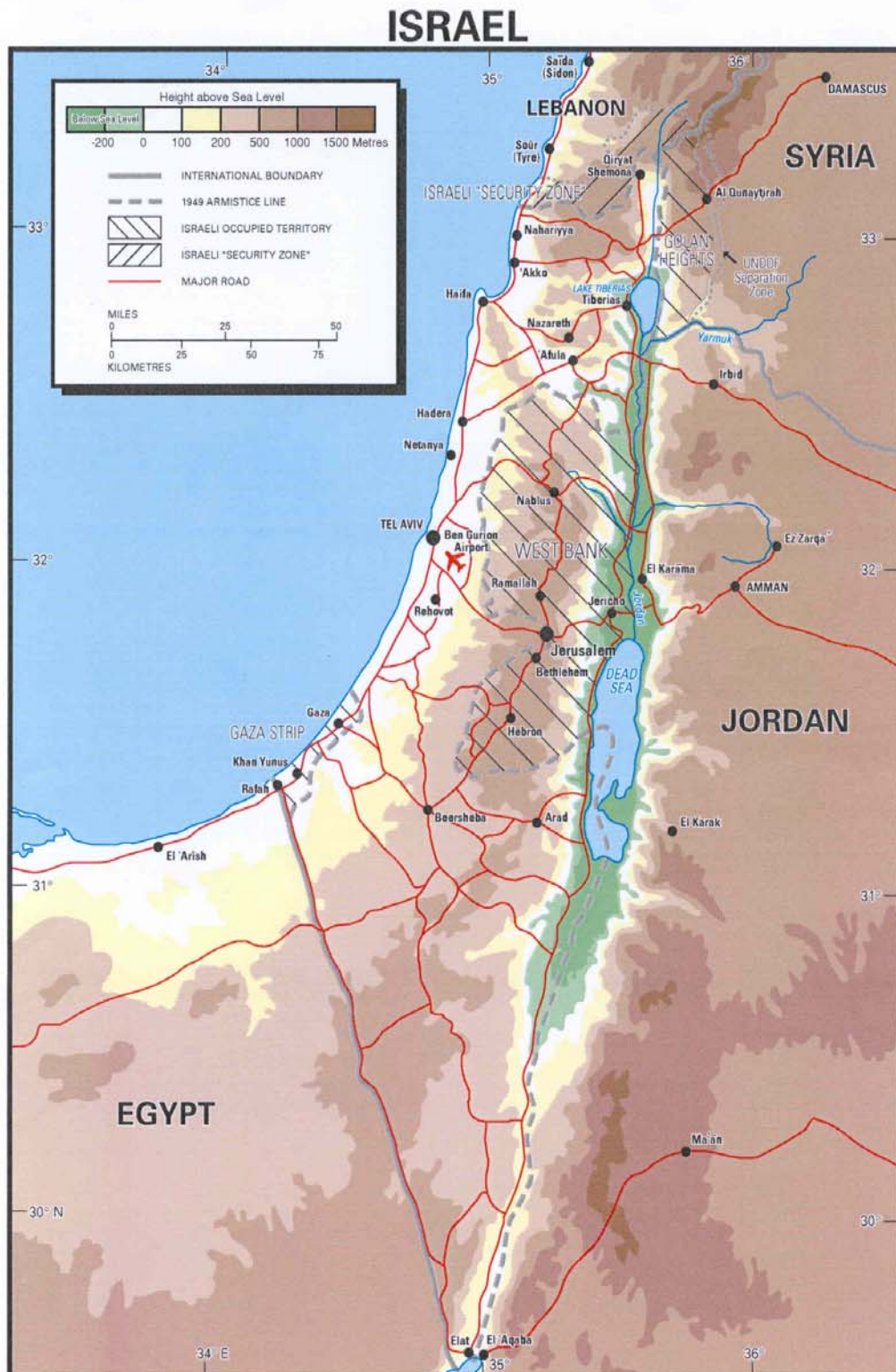
⁹³ Alastair Crooke, ['Our second biggest mistake in the Middle East'](#), *London Review of Books*, 28 June 2007

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

Appendix 1 - Map of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza



General Staff Map Section, GSGS 11090 (CAD), Edition 8-GSGS, August 1996 978/96 Produced by Military Survey, Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom 1996
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