



Published on *The American Task Force on Palestine* (<http://www.americantaskforce.org>)

[Home](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#)

---

# Sense, Nonsense and Strategy in the New Palestinian Political Landscape

*Issue Paper* by Hussein Ibish - September 6, 2007 - 12:00am

The catastrophic division that has recently developed in Palestine, with the national leadership split between two fiefdoms and in a state of open conflict, has left Palestinians and their allies around the world dismayed, and struggling to reformulate a viable strategy for ending the occupation. As people search for guidance and try to make sense of a shocking turn of events, misleading and overwrought polemics have become more prevalent than sober analysis.

In the United States, a small but vocal and influential group of left-wing commentators, taking their lead from others in the Middle East, has reacted by defending the conduct of Hamas and heaping vitriol on Fateh and the PLO. Of course the Muslim religious right has its direct supporters, although in the United States for legal and other reasons straightforward identification with Hamas tends to be more subterranean and muted than overt. As a result, this small faction of leftist writers, who cannot in any sense be accused of being Islamists themselves, has emerged as the principal public defenders of Hamas' actions and its struggle to seize power in Palestine. However sincere or well-intentioned, this rhetoric could have a decidedly negative influence and, if taken seriously by enough people, might significantly undermine efforts to help to end the occupation.

One cannot simply support any and every party or organization just because they are Palestinians, even though this is the understandable instinct of a great many friends of Palestine. Instincts, however genuine, are no substitute for an informed and effective political strategy designed to achieve specific goals – in this case, to end the occupation. To work effectively towards ending the occupation, there is no need for supporters of Palestine to become partisans of Fateh, defenders of all of their actions and methods, or fans of their personalities. However, important choices need to be made and there are serious consequences to all of our words and deeds. The stakes could hardly be higher.

Four vital questions need to be addressed. What explains the counter-intuitive phenomenon of Arabs nominally on the left coming to the defense of the Muslim far-right? What exactly have these left-wing sympathizers with the far-right been saying in recent months? What actually happened in Gaza and the West Bank? And, most importantly, what should friends of Palestine in the United States do now?

## 1: Why do some on the Arab left support the Muslim far-right?

This is certainly not the first time in history that elements of the left have come around the back end of the political circle into an open embrace of the far-right – an embrace, one should note, that is almost never returned except through a kiss of death. In the Middle Eastern context, consider what happened to the leftist groups that promoted the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, who was seemingly a model of “pluralism and democracy” until he consolidated his power and began executing his former allies. The case of Khomeini and Iran also reminds us that no less than Michel Foucault, one of the most brilliant and influential intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century, could be seduced by the appeal of radical politics of this kind (see, for example, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, University Of Chicago Press, 2005). Foucault’s misguided support for the Iranian revolution still stands as an outstanding example of how badly mistaken even the most perceptive and keen minds – let alone lesser ones – can become when emotion clouds judgment and human values are discarded in favor of the thrall of extreme.

In this case, left-wing enthusiasm for the far-right Hamas is symptomatic of a wider and troubling phenomenon in Arab political culture. The left-wing movements and governments that dominated much of the Arab scene from at least the 1940s to the late 1970s have generally fallen into serious disrepair, in some cases all but vanishing, or at least becoming of marginal relevance. No Arab government today has a legitimately leftist look or feel about it. Certainly the main opposition movements and parties in every Arab society now are Islamist of one stripe or another. This has been increasingly true for more than two decades.

So, in as much as it does still exist, the Arab left unfortunately is neither the government nor the opposition, but rather a bit player with limited popular support, consisting mainly of handfuls of journalists, intellectuals and lonely reformers (the last often languishing in prisons). In this wilderness, some of the Arab left has allowed itself to be lured into an ideologically compromised position, and drawn into false binaries that lead to an otherwise inexplicable alignment with reactionary theocratic forces. Of course, there are still many pockets and centers of bona fide leftist thinking and values in the Arab world, and it is in these remaining enclaves of secularism and liberalism that much of the hope for the future of the region resides.

But the fact is that far too much of the Arab left has abandoned, or had stripped away from it, most of its traditional values. These missing elements include class analysis and a materialist program for social change, secularism and iconoclasm, feminism and the cause of women’s rights, internationalism and other key aspects of its erstwhile political agenda. The only aspect of its traditional program that seems to have survived the implosion of the Arab left movement intact is the impulse of ethno-centric Arab nationalism, suspicion of the West and hatred of Israel.

As a consequence, some of the Arab left now finds itself reading politics mainly through a lens of an ethnic, at times almost tribal, nationalism. But the mantle of oppositional and revolutionary nationalism is now worn almost exclusively by Islamist groups, though their rhetoric usually mixes religious categories and formulations with nationalistic ones. The Islamists claim to resist the West, a hostile imperial order and subservient regional governments, and use analogous language to denounce the same conditions, policies and alliances that provoke nationalist outrage on the left.

Moreover, many Islamist opposition groups conduct themselves strategically in the image-ideal of left parties, while the Arab left itself does not. This involves constituting the main opposition to governments and the main revolutionary movements in all Arab societies, providing direct services to the people, rhetorical populism, extensive use of violence for revolutionary purposes, organizing both in open political party structures and underground cells, and above all nationalist goals and rhetoric, especially opposition to Israel, the United States and the West, and the regional order in the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, since it is a regional network of aligned parties with a clear and consistent ideology, closely resembles a Leninist revolutionary movement in purely formal terms, although not at all in ideological content. These and other factors have lured some on the Arab left to adopt a stance not only in support of theocratic and reactionary forces but also to develop an attitude of admiration, at times even envy, towards them.

Thus Islamist positions on national and international issues can appear not only acceptable but even appealing to some on the Arab and Arab-American left. What gets lost or ignored in the process is the reactionary, repressive and theocratic agenda of these far right-wing religious movements and their clearly stated political and social policies. The case of Hamas, which is in effect the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, is perhaps the most striking recent example in which some leftist commentators have rushed to lionize such a movement, champion its attempts to seize power and denounce its rivals in the strongest imaginable terms, all in apparent total indifference to its actual policies and goals.

## **2. What have these commentators been saying and why are they wrong?**

Perhaps the most strident Arab-American voice of this kind has been Columbia University Professor Joseph Massad. Similar sentiments have been expressed by two noted left-of-center bloggers, As'ad AbuKhalil of California State University, Stanislaus, who runs the aptly named Angry Arab blog, and Ali Abunimah (a former co-author of mine) as well as some other writers on his Electronic Intifada website.

In two well-circulated articles in the Egyptian English-language newspaper al-Ahram Weekly, Massad drew an extended analogy that compared Hamas to the deposed and murdered Chilean leftist President Salvador Allende, and Fateh to the fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet – oblivious to the absurdity of comparing an overtly theocratic and reactionary movement to a progressive one. When someone comes to the point of looking at Khaled Mishaal and seeing Salvador Allende, their moral and political compass may be so badly broken that there is little hope of them ever finding their way back.

Pushing a similar analogy, Abunimah has repeatedly compared Fateh and the PLO to the Nicaraguan contras, as if these groups were simply the fabrications of US intelligence services for the purpose of overthrowing a revolutionary government, arguing, “This is a repeat strategy of the contras. These are Palestinian contras.”

Rather than seeing the obvious faults on both sides, these writers have placed one hundred percent of the blame for the conflict between Hamas and Fateh on the latter, heaping the most damning criticisms on the secular nationalists while praising the Islamists at almost every turn and attempting to paint them as a temperate and moderate organization. All three insist that the division is not between secularists and Islamists, but rather between a gang of traitors versus the defenders of Palestine. As Abunimah put it, “the split among Palestinians

today is not between Hamas and Fatah, nor between 'extremist' or 'moderate,' or 'Islamist' or 'secular,' but between the minority who have cast their lot in with the enemy as collaborators on the one hand, and those who uphold the right and duty to resist on the other."

Writing in the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar, now the Arabic-language home of choice for such sentiments, Massad declared, "the supporters of Hamas, whether believers or atheists or secularists or Islamists, are the supporters of the real Palestinian democracy because Hamas's struggle is a struggle against dictatorial traitors (under the legal definition of treason)" [translations from Mideastwire.com]. To deal with the crisis in Palestinian politics, Massad's agenda boils down simply to accusations, accusations and more accusations: "The only antidote to these forces of true darkness is to continue to support and mobilise for Palestinian democracy and to expose the anti-democracy coup leaders and their apologist intellectuals for what they are: collaborators with the enemy."

Massad passionately defended Hamas' extremely violent takeover of Gaza, claiming that Fateh had "pushed it into a corner in the hope of slaughtering all its leadership in Gaza" and that therefore Hamas "could not but defend itself against their final onslaught." Fateh is painted as simply an agent of Israel and the United States. Massad refers to what he calls the "Fateh leadership's complete collaboration and subservience to Israeli interests," and "Palestinian collaborators with the enemy: the Fatah leadership abetted by the United States," who supposedly have an "overall strategy to destroy Palestinian democracy." In May, 2006, AbuKhalil urged Hamas to "to pre-empt their enemies if they want to rule," anticipating the bloody scenes in Gaza a year later. For his part, Abunimah has gone so far as to accuse Fateh of waging a "war against the Palestinian people."

Massad uses a rather shop-worn technique in his al-Ahram articles bashing Fateh and the PLO by selecting a derogatory phrase and repeating it endlessly. In the first piece in which he introduced his Hamas=Allende equation, Massad used variations on the phrase "Fateh thugs" at least seven times. In the second, he included variations of "Fateh putschists" (a phrase presumably chosen to make them sound like Nazis) no less than 13 times, with four references to "coup plotters" thrown in for good measure.

While every effort is made to paint Fateh and the Palestinian secular nationalists in the worst possible light, Hamas is presented as the champion of democracy and a model of moderation and flexibility. Massad really seems convinced that Hamas – whose stated goal is the establishment of a theocratic Islamic state – is committed to genuine pluralistic democracy because it defends its position on the basis of a 44% win in one parliamentary election. In another al-Akhbar article, Massad sarcastically contrasted "the dictatorial light of Fatah against the democratic darkness of Hamas."

Massad takes every opportunity to create the impression that Hamas and democracy are organically linked, calling them variously "the Palestinian democratic government" and "the democratically elected Hamas," as if Mahmoud Abbas did not win a Presidential election by 63% of the vote, and every opinion poll did not continue to give some edge or other to Fateh in Palestinian popular support. And as if Hamas were really committed to pluralism and democracy as a long term vision for the state they seek to establish.

A further irony is that some of these same writers cast serious doubts on the importance and validity of Palestinian elections when Fateh – and not Hamas – emerged victorious.

When it was obvious that Abbas was about to be elected Palestinian president in January

2005, Abunimah's website published an article arguing that "the elections are a liability for the Palestinians" and another quite rightly pointing out that "Palestine can never experience true democracy while it remains under occupation." Abunimah himself argued that, "the Israeli occupation makes democracy impossible." After the election, numerous articles on the site charged "fraud" and various other condemnations of the process, which was run by the same commission that oversaw the subsequent sacrosanct parliamentary elections won by Hamas.

Then in February 2005, Abunimah's site published an article entitled "The False Promise of Western Democracy" which claimed that the election of Abbas "added to a growing worldwide skepticism about Western notions of democracy (i.e. institutionalized suffrage, parliamentary procedures, etc.)" The article argued that, "the value of Western democracy is questionable for the Palestinian people" and condemned the international community for "an invasive imposition of democratic practices" on the Palestinians. There were no articles to this effect on the Electronic Intifada website following the Hamas parliamentary victory in 2006.

Not only does this rhetoric cast Hamas as the last, best hope for Palestinian democracy, its supposed moderation, pluralism, pragmatism and flexibility – all features glaringly absent from its actual policies and conduct – are celebrated as well. Abunimah thinks "Hamas leaders have made exemplary statements in favor of pluralism, genuine democracy, and the rule of law" and that "from the moment it won the elections Hamas had tried to be pragmatic and flexible." He argues that, "Hamas has continued to react to Abbas' escalating war with equanimity." Massad claims that the scenes of looting and violence in Gaza were much more contained than in the West Bank, a patently untrue assertion, and that in contrast to Fateh, "Hamas brought looting and disorder by some of its members under control within days." In the build-up to the conflict, he praised Hamas as "wisely adamant that it will respond by force only when Fateh launches an all-out war," and as ready to "defend the rights of the Palestinians to resist the Israeli occupation."

Abunimah recently opined that, "We know what Hamas is against, but no one is clear what it is for." In fact, Hamas has been very clear and consistent in what it stands for, both rigidly and inflexibly. This has been one of its principal sources of appeal in contrast to the flexibility and ambiguity that Fateh and PLO leaders needed to cultivate given that they were serious about trying to negotiate a deal with Israel that required room to maneuver. Hamas has been unequivocal since its founding in stating plainly that its aim is to establish an Islamic state, along the lines generally outlined by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, from the river to the sea, that is in all of mandatory Palestine. What happens to the Jews, Christians and atheists under such circumstances is not clear, but they will at best have to submit to living in an "Islamic society," whatever that might mean in practice. Following the bloody expulsion of Fateh from Gaza, Hamas fighters in many instances removed the Palestinian flags from atop government and other buildings and instead hoisted the "Islamic" green party banner of Hamas, a dramatic demonstration that the priorities of some Hamas leaders and members emphasize its religious ideology and the regional agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood movement over Palestinian national identity and goals.

Hamas also seeks, perhaps even as a primary aim, to "Islamize" Palestinian Muslim society along ultraconservative and salafist Brotherhood lines. As a small reminder to some of its Arab-American admirers about what this religious-right social agenda means, let us recall that the Hamas government's foreign minister, Mahmoud Zahar, told an astonished Wolf Blitzer of CNN in his first post-election interview that an "Islamic" society in Palestine was needed because a "secular system allows homosexuality, allows corruption, allows the spread of the loss of natural immunity, like AIDS. We are here living under Islamic control." In 2005, the

same gentleman condemned dancing between men and women, and castigated “homosexuals and lesbians, a minority of perverts and the mentally and morally sick.” Meanwhile, Hamas’ education minister banned a book of folkloric tales because of its “immoral” references to romance.

This crystal-clear but extreme agenda may well have been a net plus to Hamas when it stood in opposition and in contrast to the governing Fateh and the PLO. But after the election victory in 2006, these policies meant that the new Palestinian government was unable to deal not only with the West but also with most of the Arab states as well. Hamas was urged to moderate its policies on three crucial fronts: to formally renounce deliberate attacks against civilians, to agree (as all other governments must) to abide by the treaty obligations undertaken by its predecessors, and to state a willingness to negotiate an end to the occupation based on mutual recognition with Israel in accordance with international law and a mountain of UN Security Council resolutions beginning with Resolution 242. Hamas adamantly refused to take any such steps, preferring to stick with its well-established positions (i.e. “what it is for”) and remain the not-ready-for-prime-time government. The people of Palestine, especially in Gaza, are continuing to pay the price.

Certainly some Hamas leaders made conciliatory or positive statements from time to time, but these were almost always immediately contradicted by other party leaders, and no formal policy changes have been enacted since the election. The result was that Palestinians were left for more than a year with a government incapable of forming essential diplomatic relations with much-needed allies or conducting a viable strategy for liberation. Ultimately, it strongly contributed to the current disastrous political sundering.

The explanation these commentators offer for Fateh’s policies and its opposition to Hamas is not the need for a workable strategy to end the occupation or an honest difference of political and ideological opinion, but willful wickedness and a lust for power and money at the expense of the Palestinian people. Singled out for especial condemnation has been the beloved Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who has had the temerity to remain a secular nationalist and opponent of Hamas and Islamist groups in general. Massad frankly accuses Darwish of being a prostitute: “Perhaps Mahmoud Darwish’s recent poem in support of the coup published on the front page of the Saudi newspaper Al-Hayat, can be explained by the monthly checks he receives from the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority, and he is not alone.” In al-Akhbar Massad elaborated on this theme, claiming “Those secularists who support dictators and colonizers are mainly interested in living the good life provided to them by the treason of Fatah and its corruption and its theft of the money of the Palestinian people to pamper its leaders and intellectuals.” So, not only Darwish, but all those who support the secular leadership as opposed to Hamas do so only for the crudest forms of personal gain.

AbuKhalil too has accused Darwish of political prostitution in the harshest terms. He claims that Darwish supports Fateh because the “Oslo regime gave him a nice house in Ramallah,” and that “the position of Mahmud Darwish on Oslo became more clear when Arafat bought him an old house in Ramallah, and increased his generosity to him.” AbuKhalil blogged that, “I expect him [Darwish] to declare [Israeli Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert the ‘knight of Zionism’ any day now,” and that his recent poetry reading in Haifa was properly translated, “I want Nobel. Please give me Nobel. I really want Nobel. Please give it to me NOW. If you give me Nobel, I will keep repeating that Arabs are in love with Israeli nuclear weapons.”

Darwish, it need hardly be added, has devoted his life to the Palestinian cause. He has provided its main voice in the arena of international arts and letters, acting as both its

conscience and articulate consciousness. His writing enjoys a deserved and unequalled respect among the Palestinians and other Arabs. He has embodied an attachment to the land, and a will to resist occupation while voluntarily returning to Ramallah to live under its rigors. He could easily be living in the comfort and security of New York or California if he so chose.

These hyperbolic, hyper-personalized and low-blow attacks on Darwish typify the style and substance of the approach to Palestinian politics that has been developed by the leftist and secular defenders of Hamas. It is all about condemning other Palestinians, Arabs and their supporters in the harshest imaginable terms as traitors, quislings, collaborators and prostitutes. It is worth noting that in some contexts these accusations could well constitute an incitement to violence. After all, what is typically done to traitors and collaborators, especially those who are condemned not just rhetorically but, as Massad put it, “under the legal definition of treason?” One has to wonder what these commentators think all of this can possibly accomplish.

### **3. If this narrative is badly flawed, what actually happened in Gaza and the West Bank?**

In order to evaluate the realities facing Palestinians and their allies, it is first necessary to outline what has and what has not actually taken place. The fairy-tale narrative outlined above by the leftist admirers of Hamas – which amounts to a contest between the children of light versus the forces of darkness – is not to be taken seriously. But how then to view the most radical split in the Palestinian political scene in many decades, in order to formulate an appropriate response?

First and foremost, it needs to be understood that no one has launched a “coup” against Palestinian democracy, even though that is precisely what both sides accuse each other of. What has happened is that each party won a democratic election, both about as free and fair as could be hoped for under conditions of occupation and other obvious constraints. Fateh leader Mahmoud Abbas won the presidential election in January 2005 with about 63% of the vote, although Hamas did not field a candidate because they were certain of defeat. A year later in January 2006, Hamas candidates won 44% of the vote in parliamentary elections giving the group an outright majority and the power to appoint a cabinet. The result was a divided government much like that in the present United States, with one party in charge of the executive and the other in charge of the legislature (although the role of these branches differs in the two systems).

The problems that led to the violent explosion in Gaza in June, 2007, are rooted in both ideology and practical considerations. It was always going to be difficult for a government split between secular nationalists on the one hand and Islamists on the other to form a functioning working relationship given the vast chasm separating them with regard to strategies for liberation, the nature of the Palestinian state, and relations with Israel and other regional powers. These divisions made it all but impossible to achieve any sort of consensus on the most important national issues facing the Palestinian people.

Because Hamas rejects all of the agreements made by previous Palestinian governments and categorically refuses any possibility of ever recognizing Israel, it has placed itself completely at odds with the decades-long strategy pursued by the PLO of seeking to end the occupation through a negotiated agreement. Moreover, Hamas’ refusal to renounce attacks against Israeli civilians and other policies objectionable to the international community meant that both Hamas and Fateh elements of the new government were effectively boycotted by

the rest of the world. Hamas leaders had promised the Palestinians before, during and after the election that Arab states would make up for any shortfall in funding if the West turned off the taps in the event of a Hamas victory in the 2006 elections. This proved to be an illusion as few Arab governments were eager to fund a party that rejects completely the Arab League peace initiative and dismisses every element of international law on the conflict meticulously assembled over the past four decades. They were also understandably reluctant to give money to the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood movement that in effect seeks to overthrow or replace most of them. For months the Arabs and others waited for signs of a moderation of Hamas' radical policies, all in vain.

Meanwhile, Fateh was reeling from its defeat and found its diplomatic options severely curtailed under the new conditions. Tensions quickly grew into armed confrontations sparked by both sides on different occasions. A Saudi effort at mediation in the early months of 2007 bought a few more precious months of calm, but with Hamas the dominant power in Gaza and Fateh still far stronger in the West Bank, a violent confrontation leading to the current split was probably unavoidable. The idea, as presented by Massad and friends, that Hamas was simply trying to govern as best it could while Fateh plotted to launch a war to exterminate it on behalf of Israel is simply laughable. In fact both parties sought to use all means to undermine each other and when push came inevitably to shove, each used force to drive as much of the other's influence out of their respective fiefdoms as possible.

The process started with Hamas driving Fateh out of Gaza in June, killing some of its captured fighters and ransacking offices and homes, including that of Abu Jihad's widow. They also made a great show of stomping on portraits of Yassir Arafat. Fateh responded in kind, although to a lesser degree, in the West Bank, ransacking Hamas offices and arresting and brutalizing its cadres. The two sides accused each other of the worst offenses they could think of, with Hamas leaders denouncing Fateh as traitors and collaborators in language very similar to that cited above, and Abbas and others accusing Hamas of being terrorists and murderers.

In other words, looking at the course of events and seeing clean hands is simply delusional. Both parties behaved badly, and put their own interests ahead of that of the national movement. The only real winners so far are the Israeli right-wing who wish to avoid any moves towards ending the occupation. Therefore, empty chatter about a "coup" by one side against the other or against democracy, or a war by some Palestinians against the Palestinian people, is little more than low-grade partisan propaganda masquerading as analysis. Anyone who cannot recognize the glaring faults on both sides of this debacle is not to be taken seriously.

There is no doubt that the tremendous failings of Fateh as a party and a national leadership contributed heavily to Hamas' victory in 2006. Fateh long since became a hotbed of corruption and mismanagement. Years of cronyism under Arafat and the systematic pilfering of funds that ought to have benefited the public have yet to be seriously addressed by Fateh's party leadership, the laudable efforts of Salam Fayyad in this regard notwithstanding.

Moreover, Fateh had come to lack what Hamas had developed in the period leading up to the elections: party discipline and unity. While Hamas spent the months before the election reaching out to potential allies and sympathizers beyond the party rolls for support and even as candidates, Fateh was sinking quickly into a morass of petty personal domains of influence and corrosive rivalries. It would not be an overstatement to say that in the run-up to the 2006 vote, Hamas unified itself and reached beyond its membership while Fateh imploded and was

actually expelling people from the party. Fateh was, and is, in desperate need of internal reform and radical restructuring, or it needs to be replaced by an alternative secular nationalist party.

Mahmoud Abbas has demonstrated an unshakable dedication to the goal of establishing a viable and independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, a principled position that has required both personal and political courage. However, he has proven an uninspiring leader. He lacks the charisma that many politicians rely upon, and is not an emotive speaker. Because his fundamental impulse is always to negotiate the resolution of any conflict – whether with Israel, Hamas or within Fateh itself – he has missed important political opportunities. And ever since he was elected president, Abbas has been systematically undercut by Israel, which rendered him largely ineffective by blocking any improvement in the lives of ordinary Palestinians and refusing, up till the current round of serious talks, to reopen fully-fledged negotiations designed to end the occupation.

This lack of results, above all in making progress towards statehood and liberation, seriously damaged the electoral prospects of Fateh in 2006. Abbas ran in 2005 on a platform that explicitly rejected the disastrous militarization of the intifada and called for an end to the conflict through a negotiated end to the occupation. For more than a year, he and Fateh were in uncontested power with that mandate. Israel and the United States gave the Palestinians little reason to hope, during this period, that this approach was likely to yield results any time in the foreseeable future. Therefore Hamas benefited not just from the votes of its actual supporters, but also from various forms of protest vote including good governance and anti-corruption sentiments, and frustration with the lack of Israeli willingness to negotiate with Abbas.

However, it would be a serious misreading of the results to conclude that the 2006 election victory of Hamas was a mandate for its policies with regard to Israel. Every single opinion poll and survey conducted after the election showed that a sizeable majority of Palestinians still supported a two-state arrangement with Israel and wanted Hamas as well as Fateh to negotiate. Indeed, it seems plausible to speculate that, as with many run-away protest votes, a decent number of Palestinians voted for Hamas candidates in 2006 without suspecting that they would be contributing to an overall parliamentary majority for the Islamists. In any event, even Hamas seemed surprised by the result.

Whether or not Hamas was in fact surprised by their victory, they most certainly were unprepared for government. As noted above, their policies, which were plainly forged to facilitate their role as an opposition party, proved completely unworkable as a platform for a government dependent on external support for the means of daily living, let alone the need for vital international diplomatic support. In particular, the failure of Hamas to renounce terrorism and commit to a policy of not deliberately attacking Israeli civilians ensured that most of the world would decline to deal with a cabinet led by such an organization. Hamas' refusal to moderate its core policies given the realities of governmental responsibility, more than any other factor, made the clash with Fateh almost inevitable.

Although the intra-Palestinian conflict is rooted to a very large extent in internal Palestinian politics, it has also been strongly affected by regional factors and outside influences playing on both sides. A major consequence of the fiasco in Iraq has been the division of almost all of the Middle East into two competing camps, one led by the United States, the other by Iran. The Iraqi misadventure and other policies of the Bush Administration have inadvertently resulted in an enormous strengthening of the Iranian hand in the region. To be sure Iran had

its allies before the invasion of Iraq, but four years ago there was hardly an ascendant pro-Iranian block challenging the regional order. Now, there is. The upshot is that everywhere in the Arab world where there are weak central governments whose writ does not run very far, proxy conflicts have emerged between those aligned with either camp. This is true in Lebanon, Iraq and elsewhere. It is also clearly at work in the conflict between Hamas and Fateh.

The left-wing admirers of Hamas have described these events as an American conspiracy against Palestine (which they have dubbed “the Bush Doctrine,” giving the Administration both too much credit and blame simultaneously), and noted Western and even some tepid Israeli support for Fateh in its confrontation with Hamas. On the other hand, the Bush Administration, much of the American media, supporters of Israel and others were quick to label the Hamas takeover of Gaza an Iranian-inspired and funded plot. In fact both sides receive support from interested external parties who are seeking advantage in this contest. Hamas receives an undisclosed amount of money from Iran, but the amount plainly runs at least into the hundreds of millions of dollars. The exact extent of this support is unknown because Hamas finances lack transparency and are totally hidden from public knowledge. Now that Fateh governs the West Bank alone, it is once again receiving aid from the West and the Arab world, and Israel is releasing frozen Palestinian tax funds to it as well. Both groups can and do accuse each other of acting as proxies for external powers. This is obviously an exaggeration since internal Palestinian dynamics have largely driven the conflict. However, to ignore the regional context in which it is being shaped or to see the hands only of one set of external actors and not the other would be extremely foolish.

The Palestinian public has had the good sense to blame both sides for the disastrous split in the national leadership. Majorities in every poll not only blame both, they urge reconciliation and continue to support an end to the conflict based on a negotiated agreement for two states. They also continue to give an edge to Fateh over Hamas, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the poll and the specific candidates, and rate the performance of the new Fayyad government in the West Bank somewhat more highly than the Hanniyeh government in Gaza. A majority is also in favor of new elections in the near future, although this presently seems out of the question. The Palestinian people seem to understand clearly that the big winners in this scenario are the right-wingers in Israel, and indeed Iran as well, but certainly not the Palestinians themselves or either of their main political factions for that matter.

#### **4. What should supporters of Palestine in the United States do now?**

Palestinians and their allies are confronting a new and unexpected challenge to ending the occupation and creating a unified state that is democratic, pluralistic and tolerant as well as fully sovereign. This time the obstacles are internal: the growing power of Hamas, which is not committed to such principles, and the division that has ripped the national leadership into two effectively warring camps. This split has given an undeserved and unfortunate modicum of validity to Israel’s traditionally absurd argument that it does not know with which Palestinians to negotiate. Meanwhile, the long-standing external obstacles to Palestinian independence – Israeli intransigence and the occupation itself, American domestic political forces, European neglect, Arab weakness and disunity, Iranian opportunism, etc. – remain as firmly in place as ever. How then to proceed, especially for those of us living and working in the United States?

The first step should be to recognize that the end of the occupation must be the main aim of words and deeds. This ought to be the firm, unwavering focus of advocacy in behalf of

Palestine for about 5 million reasons, since each and every individual Palestinian suffering under this subjugation constitutes a reason to focus on ending it. The only serious prospect of ending the conflict and gaining independence for the Palestinian people lies through the path of a negotiated end to the occupation and the creation of a Palestinian state. This is not an perfect or ideal solution. Few political constructs ever are. But, if properly crafted, such an agreement could and would end both the conflict and the occupation.

We must also agree that the conditions and circumstances of the people of Gaza in particular are totally unacceptable from a purely humanitarian viewpoint. Gaza is more a giant prison than ever, and its dependence on outside support for such basics as water, electricity and food – especially on Israel, which is still legally and effectively the occupying power in Gaza – is being exploited to pressure Hamas, including, unfortunately, by the Fateh leadership in the West Bank. Hamas too has strongly contributed in many ways to crisis, most recently by moving to shut down health clinics run by Fateh supporters and funded from the West Bank. Hamas is beginning to discover, it would seem, that governing the “Islamic Emirate of Gaza” or however they wish to view their fiefdom, is not as simple a matter as it may have seemed from opposition benches, especially for a party that refuses to speak with Israel and vice-versa. However, the people of Gaza should not be punished in this manner and every lawful effort to support humanitarian work to aid them should be undertaken.

Beyond humanitarian initiatives, a new and serious political strategy needs to be adopted. The bitter experience of many decades of advocacy, organizing and political action in the United States has demonstrated that traditional approaches simply have not worked in shifting the perceptions of most Americans or government policy. The split in the Palestinian movement has made those traditional approaches even less likely to yield results. Accusations, condemnations, boycotts of other Palestinians and other self-defeating and wholly negative approaches can be dispensed with at the outset.

Instead what is required is an approach based on political realities and a clear sense of both the goals of activism and how words and deeds will promote those aims. For too long, Arab-Americans and others laboring in support of Palestine have proceeded without a strategy that recognizes what will and will not function politically. For example, relying on moral arguments or invoking international law was never likely to cut much ice with most other Americans, especially when the competing approach has been to present Israel as a vital strategic asset to the United States, first during the Cold War and now in the “war on terror.” Moreover, an approach that simply condemns Israel and the United States, now lamentably extended to include and even focus on other Palestinians and Arabs, is trapped in the limitations of its own negativity. By offering nothing of positive value, it functions as a terribly weak argument for ending the occupation. Any successful approach must, perforce, emphasize why it is in everyone’s interests to bring the conflict to an end, and the benefits to the United States, and indeed Israel, of freedom for the Palestinian people.

Therefore, while recognizing the faults on both sides and continuing to urge reconciliation among Palestinian factions, Arab-Americans and their supporters need to make some vital choices about what they support in Palestine. Supporting Hamas means, in effect, embracing their stated aims, if not all of their methods. No one can honestly claim to be unsure of what its agenda for Palestine really is, since Hamas has clearly expressed and unwaveringly pursued it since the organization’s founding.

Hamas’ main aim, as noted above, is the establishment of an “Islamic” state in all of mandatory Palestine along ultra-conservative Muslim Brotherhood lines. Every serious

critique of Zionism has noted the moral and ethical inadmissibility of enforcing a “Jewish” state in this same area, given that at least half of the population between the river and the sea is Muslim and Christian. How does the aim of establishing a so-called “Islamic” state in the same area have any greater validity than the enforcement of a Jewish one, unless one buys into absurd notions of religious or ethnic supremacy? In addition, the social agenda envisioned for such a society appears to be oppressive and deeply restrictive. Those liberals and leftists presently inclined to be sympathetic to Hamas need to step back and ask themselves: are we really laboring to support the creation of another theocracy in the Middle East? Would we want to live in such a society? Is that what liberation looks like?

As for the preferred methods of Hamas, suffice it to say that the suicide bombing campaigns it has led have done more than anything else to harm the Palestinian cause in the eyes of the world, unify Israelis, and give them a false sense that the occupation is some kind of self-defensive necessity. That is a gift that no occupier should ever be granted. This is not to mention the corrosive effect that the ideology and rhetoric of “martyrdom” has had on Palestinian society. There are and have to be limitations on what is acceptable in the pursuit of freedom, and some actions are immoral enough never to be justifiable no matter the cause and no matter the savagery engaged in by the other side.

Finally, Hamas, due to its alliances and regional orientation, is importing undue Iranian influence into the Palestinian political scene. One of the major achievements of the Arafat era was wresting control of the Palestinian agenda away from the Arab states and ensuring that it was determined by the Palestinians themselves. It would be both a tragedy and a farce to see undue Arab influence dispensed with, only for Palestine to become a card in the hands of Iranian foreign policy. To be sure, Fateh receives support from Arab states and even the West. But the risks and costs of this aid pale in comparison to an open alignment and more with the present regime in Tehran.

Fateh also has serious problems, not only with corruption and cronyism, but also incompetence at various levels, rampant disunity and a history of poor management of Palestinian diplomacy. It also is obviously no model of democracy. Autocratic tendencies that were pronounced under Arafat have continued to the present day, most notably in an ill-advised effort to craft a law that would prevent parties that do not accept Palestinian treaty obligations – that is to say, Hamas – from participating in elections. No responsible government can dismiss the solemn undertakings of its predecessors as Hamas does, but trying to use this responsibility as a pretext for barring the election of one’s rivals is no way to address the problem.

For all of its undoubted faults, Fateh’s approach at least offers the possibility of a negotiated agreement with Israel and the development of a secular state which, if not necessarily fully democratic at the outset, would be hardly as repressive as a theocracy. And it is in the possibility of an agreement to end the occupation that realistic hope for the future of Palestine lies. The real alternative is not some utopian reconciliation and post-nationalist bliss, but rather unending conflict and untold suffering.

Of course, there is a school of thought that does not wish to see a negotiated settlement with Israel, but seeks rather to dispense with Palestine altogether and replace the Israeli state and the Occupied Territories with a single entity – neither Israel nor Palestine – that would transcend nationalist identities. How this would work in practice has yet to be seriously defined in any programmatic sense. No significant political party or movement among either Israelis or Palestinians has embraced the idea, and in spite of the claims of its proponents, it

does not seem to have any serious constituency on the ground. Some advocates of the “one-state-solution” have become de facto partisans of Hamas in the present intra-Palestinian conflict, apparently attracted by the party’s opposition to a negotiated end to the conflict and its maximalist positions. However, Hamas’ aim of establishing an “Islamic” state from the river to the sea is, if anything, the very antithesis of the one-state concept, certainly further from its ethos than a two-state arrangement. In fact, it seems the mirror-image of the “greater Israel” agenda of the settler movement.

In Palestinian and pro-Palestinian discourse the factor of power is rarely acknowledged or dealt with seriously. But political realities are shaped by power, which manifests itself in many forms. The continued presence of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and their refusal to submit to Israeli domination itself is a form of power, one that has stymied Israeli ambitions to control and colonize the whole area in peace and quiet. It has led many, if not most, serious Israelis to conclude that the occupation is not tenable in the long run.

However, the overall power equation places serious constraints on Palestinian ambitions too. Palestinians are not going to be able to liberate themselves through armed struggle. Israel is not going to be driven out of the West Bank and East Jerusalem by Palestinian fighters. It is as simple as that. Therefore, in order to achieve an end to the occupation, Palestinians must come to an agreement with Israel, just as in order to have peace and security Israel must make a deal with the Palestinians. There is no military solution to this conflict for either side.

Moreover, the power equation demonstrates the Palestinians’ urgent need for international support if they are to realize their national and human rights, first of all from the other Arabs, and then the international community at large, most crucially the United States. The Palestinians cannot achieve their aims without international backing that applies pressure on Israel to come to reasonable terms and which provides the context and the support that a workable agreement and a fledgling state would obviously require. This is why Hamas’ policies that thumbed their nose at the rest of the world, including the Arabs, and rejected international law outright were so damaging to the Palestinian cause. The edifice of international law on the question of Palestine that makes it clear that the occupation is illegal and must end was painstakingly pieced together over many decades beginning with UN Security Council Resolution 242 in 1967. This body of international law is a major asset for Palestinians and a serious problem for the Israeli occupation. Tossing it aside for narrow political advantage or for the sake of an extreme and unrealistic ideology would be an unforgivable error.

Building this indispensable international backing for an end to the occupation must be a principal focus of any serious support for Palestine, above all in the United States. The single greatest tool for this the Palestinian and Arab Americans have at their disposal is their legal status in the United States. Citizenship provides the opportunity to participate in the political process and, given the requisite time, effort and investment, help to influence the national conversation and eventually the policies of the United States – which just so happens to be the most influential external player in the conflict and the region as a whole. Therefore the primary task is to engage the political system nationally and the policy conversation as it actually takes place in Washington.

Friends of Palestine in the United States must be clear about the principles that inform their activism. If people are genuinely in sympathy with the aims and methods of Hamas, then that is one thing. But these of us who seek first to end the occupation and then support the development of a democratic and pluralistic Palestinian state have to hold firm to those

commitments. This means at the very least not defending those whose stated policies and concrete actions run strictly counter to those aims. It is not necessary to support any particular entity to promote these principles, and it is hardly our role as Americans to carry water for any leadership outside of our own country. But support for those principles must translate into sober judgments about what and who is most likely to promote them, and words and deeds should follow these considerations. Dismissing those who hold firm to these important values and goals as “diplomatic fronts” or “Washington lobbies” for narrow Palestinian political factions, or, most preposterously, as “neoconservatives,” is beneath contempt. To be principled is to be honorable and sincere, even if possibly mistaken.

To be effective requires the development and promotion of a receivable message that can function politically in the United States about the benefits to America and the world of ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state. Such a message could emphasize the benefits to US policy goals in the region generally, reducing the appeal of anti-American extremism in the region, enhancing the US role as a responsible world leader, the promotion of American values such as independence and citizenship, and economic benefits to the region and the United States. It could also point out that ending the occupation would complicate efforts by destabilizing powers in the region, most notably Iran, to exploit the issue for its own purposes. The overall message should be that ending the occupation is a vital strategic interest of the United States.

In addition to developing more effective advocacy, friends of Palestine need to help build a serious national and international coalition to end the occupation. The Arab League peace initiative, for example, provides a significant platform to build upon, as it offers Israelis the potential of achieving what they say they have always wanted. Just as Palestinians and Israelis need to come to terms with each other in order to realize their rights and security, and to ensure a decent future for both peoples, supporters of Palestine in the United States will have to develop a functioning working relationship with a wide variety of organizations that support an end to the occupation and the conflict.

The motivations for such support are irrelevant, as are differences on other issues. Policy changes in a system as complex as the American one require broad-based, single-issue alliances between factions who agree on little, or even nothing, else. Supporters of Palestine and Israel in our country have glared and shouted at each other for many decades for very understandable reasons. However, since Israelis and Palestinians need to come to reasonable terms in the interests of both peoples, Jewish and Arab Americans who are serious about peace also need to develop, insofar as possible, functional working relationships.

I do not mean here simply Jewish and pro-Israel groups that oppose the occupation on moral grounds, but those that wish to end it for practical and selfish reasons as well. We are never going to convince each other to abandon the narratives that inform our support for Israel and Palestine respectively. But since, for different reasons, Israelis and Palestinians finally find themselves needing the same thing – an end to the conflict based on an end to the occupation – Arab and Jewish Americans ought and need to be able to build a working alliance to support that aim. Israel has every reason, purely in its own manifest self-interest, to come to reasonable terms with the Palestinians, and its American supporters have every reason to encourage it to do so, even though not everyone has fully comprehended this yet. Many others would want to be involved too, as the whole project would emphasize the benefits of an end to the occupation for US foreign policy and the world at large.

Indeed, almost all parties – Palestinian, Israeli, Arab, European, Asian and of course American – need this conflict to be resolved, and the formula of two states living side-by-side in peace is the only viable means of doing so. Only forces radically and violently opposed to the regional and world order, or extremist groups on both sides and their allies who consciously prefer unending war over painful compromise, actively reject it. Until now those extremist minorities have managed to exercise a veto over the will of the majorities and the needs of all of these parties. This veto must be revoked. If we say we want the same thing, we should at least try to call each other's bluff and test the waters rather than concluding from the outset that it is inconceivable that self-interest might actually bring friends of Palestine and Israel to the same place at the same time, with the real potential of mutual benefit.

This new approach to pro-Palestinian advocacy and activism has been developed over the past few years at the American Task Force on Palestine by its president, Ziad Asali, and others, this author among them. Certainly Palestinian Americans and their allies have to recognize that their traditional approaches have failed. They must also see the poverty and pointlessness of a purely negative agenda of accusations, condemnations and criticism without positive content of any kind. Internal backbiting and mutual recriminations rationalized as “exposing the traitors and collaborators” is not a strategy for anything constructive. The keys are to take much better advantage of our status as Americans, develop new and effective forms of advocacy, and forge the alliances that can actually achieve results. To be successful in promoting Palestinian human and national rights requires the development of a positive agenda that emphasizes what is good for everyone, including Americans and Israelis, about ending the occupation, which must be the single, overriding aim of any serious political activity on behalf of Palestine and the Palestinian people.

*Hussein Ibish is a Senior Fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP).*

---

TAGS: [Gaza Economic Development](#) <sup>[1]</sup> [Hamis/Fatah Reconciliation](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [Isareli Military Action in Gaza](#) <sup>[3]</sup> [East Jerusalem](#) <sup>[4]</sup> [Israeli Elections](#) <sup>[5]</sup> [Suicide Bombings](#) <sup>[6]</sup> [One State Solution](#) <sup>[7]</sup> [Palestinian Elections](#) <sup>[8]</sup> [Peace Based on Two States](#) <sup>[9]</sup> [West Bank Economic Development](#) <sup>[10]</sup> [West Bank Humanitarian Aid](#) <sup>[11]</sup>

**[Events](#) | [Daily News](#) | [About Us](#) | [Resources](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Donate](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)**

 [Front Page Features](#)  [World Press Roundup](#)  [ATFP in the News](#)  [Policy and Analysis](#)  
 [Briefing Summaries](#)

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Aug 17 2019 - 8:36pm):**

[http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy\\_and\\_analysis/issue\\_paper/2007/09/06/1235593341](http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy_and_analysis/issue_paper/2007/09/06/1235593341)

**Links:**

- [1] [http://www.americantaskforce.org/economic\\_development/gaza\\_economic\\_development](http://www.americantaskforce.org/economic_development/gaza_economic_development)
- [2] [http://www.americantaskforce.org/palestinian\\_unity/hamas/fatah\\_reconciliation](http://www.americantaskforce.org/palestinian_unity/hamas/fatah_reconciliation)
- [3] [http://www.americantaskforce.org/israeli\\_military\\_action/isareli\\_military\\_action\\_gaza](http://www.americantaskforce.org/israeli_military_action/isareli_military_action_gaza)
- [4] [http://www.americantaskforce.org/east\\_jerusalem\\_0](http://www.americantaskforce.org/east_jerusalem_0)

- [5] [http://www.american taskforce.org/israeli\\_elections](http://www.american taskforce.org/israeli_elections)
- [6] [http://www.american taskforce.org/terrorism/suicide\\_bombings](http://www.american taskforce.org/terrorism/suicide_bombings)
- [7] [http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian\\_statehood/one\\_state\\_solution](http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian_statehood/one_state_solution)
- [8] [http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian\\_elections](http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian_elections)
- [9] [http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian\\_statehood/two\\_state\\_solution](http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian_statehood/two_state_solution)
- [10] [http://www.american taskforce.org/economic\\_development/west\\_bank\\_economic\\_development](http://www.american taskforce.org/economic_development/west_bank_economic_development)
- [11] [http://www.american taskforce.org/humanitarian/west\\_bank\\_humanitarian\\_aid](http://www.american taskforce.org/humanitarian/west_bank_humanitarian_aid)