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Elliot Abrams' uncivil war



Is the Bush administration violating the law in an effort to provoke a Palestinian civil war?



Elliot Abrams

Deputy National Security Advisor, Elliott Abrams — who *Newsweek* recently described as “the last neocon standing” — has had it about for some months now that the U.S. is not only not interested in dealing with Hamas, it is working to ensure its failure. In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas

elections, last January, Abrams greeted a group of Palestinian businessmen in his White House office with talk of a “hard coup” against the newly-elected Hamas government — the violent overthrow of their leadership with arms supplied by the United States. While the businessmen were shocked, Abrams was adamant — the U.S. had to support Fatah with guns, ammunition and training, so that they could fight Hamas for control of the Palestinian government.

While those closest to him now concede the Abrams' words were issued in a moment of frustration, the “hard coup” talk was hardly just talk. Over the last twelve months, the United States has supplied guns, ammunition and training to Palestinian Fatah activists to take on Hamas in the streets of Gaza and the West Bank. A large number of Fatah activists have been trained and “graduated” from two camps — one in Ramallah and one in Jericho. The supplies of rifles and ammunition, which started as a mere trickle, has now become a torrent (*Haaretz* reports the U.S. has designated an astounding \$86.4 million for Abu Mazen's security detail), and while the program has gone largely without notice in the American press, it is openly talked about and commented on in the Arab media — and in Israel. Thousands of rifles and bullets have been pouring into Gaza and the West Bank from Egypt and Jordan, the administration's designated allies in the program.

At first, it was thought, the resupply effort (initiated under the guise of “assist[ing] the Palestinian Authority presidency in fulfilling PA commitments under the road map to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism and establish law and order in the West Bank and Gaza,” according to a U.S. government document) would strengthen the

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security forces under the command of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Officials thought that the additional weapons would easily cow Hamas operatives, who would meekly surrender the offices they had only recently so dearly won. That has not only not happened, but the program is under attack throughout the Arab world — particularly among America's closest allies.

While both Egypt and Jordan have shipped arms to Abu Mazen under the Abrams program (Egypt recently sent 1,900 rifles into Gaza and the West Bank, nearly matching the 3000 rifles sent by the Jordanians), neither Jordan's King Abdullah nor Egypt's Hosni Mubarak believe the program will work — and both are now maneuvering to find a way out of it. "Who can blame them?" an administration official told us recently. "While Mubarak has no love for Hamas, they do not want to be seen as bringing them down. The same can be said for Jordan." A Pentagon official was even more adamant, cataloguing official Washington's nearly open disdain for Abrams' program. "This is not going to work and everyone knows it won't work. It is too clever. We're just not very good at this. This is typical Abrams stuff." This official went on to note that "it is unlikely that either Jordan or Egypt will place their future in the hands of the White House. Who the hell outside of Washington wants to see a civil war among Palestinians? Do we really think that the Jordanians think that's a good idea. The minute it gets underway, Abdullah is finished. Hell, fifty percent of his country is Palestinian."

Senior U.S. Army officers and high level civilian Pentagon officials have been the most outspoken internal administration critics of the program, which was unknown to them until mid-August, near the end of Israel's war against Hezbollah. When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld learned about it he was enraged, and scheduled a meeting with President Bush in an attempt to convince him the program would backfire. Rumsfeld was concerned that the anti-Hamas program would radicalise Muslim groups among American allies and eventually endanger U.S. troops fighting Sunni extremists in Iraq. According to our reports, Rumsfeld was told by Bush that he should keep his focus on Iraq, and that "the Palestinian brief" was in the hands of the Secretary of State. After this confrontation, Rumsfeld decided there was not much he could do.



The Abrams program was initially conceived in February of 2006 by a group of White House officials who wanted to shape a coherent and tough response to the Hamas electoral victory of January. These officials, we are told, were led by Abrams, but included national security advisors working in the Office of the Vice President, including prominent neo-conservatives David Wurmser and John Hannah. The policy was approved by

Condoleezza Rice. The President then, we are told, signed off on the program in a CIA "finding" and designated that its implementation be put under the control of Langley. But the program ran into problems almost from the beginning. "The CIA didn't like it and didn't think it

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would work," we were told in October. "The Pentagon hated it, the US embassy in Israel hated it, and even the Israelis hated it." A prominent American military official serving in Israel called the program "stupid" and "counter-productive." The program went forward despite these criticisms, however, though responsibility for its implementation was slowly put in the hands of anti-terrorism officials working closely with the State Department. The CIA "wriggled out of" retaining responsibility for implementing the Abrams plan, we have been told. Since at least August, Rice, Abrams and U.S. envoy David Welch have been its primary advocates and the program has been subsumed as a "part of the State Department's Middle East initiative." U.S. government officials refused to comment on a report that the program is now a part of the State Department's "Middle East Partnership Initiative," established to promote democracy in the region. If it is, diverting appropriated funds from the program for the purchase of weapons may be a violation of Congressional intent — and U.S. law.

The recipients of U.S. largesse have been Palestinian President Abu Mazen and Mohammad Dahlan, a controversial and charismatic Palestinian political leader from Gaza. The U.S. has also relied on advice from Mohammad Rashid, a well-known Kurdish/Palestinian financier with offices in Cairo. Even in Israel, the alliance of the U.S. with these two figures is greeted with almost open derision. While Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has hesitantly supported the program, many of his key advisors have made it clear that they want to have nothing to do with starting a Palestinian civil war. They also doubt whether Hamas can be weakened. These officials point out that, since the beginning of the program, Hamas has actually gained in strength, in part because its leaders are considered competent, transparent, uncorrupt and unwilling to compromise their ideals — just the kinds of democratically elected leaders that the Bush Administration would want to support anywhere else in the Middle East.

Of course, in public, Secretary Rice appears contrite and concerned with "the growing lawlessness" among Palestinians, while failing to mention that such lawlessness is exactly what the Abrams plan was designed to create. "You can't build security forces overnight to deal with the kind of lawlessness that is there in Gaza which largely derives from an inability to govern," she said during a recent trip to Israel. "Their [the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority] inability to govern, of course, comes from their unwillingness to meet international standards." Even Middle East experts and State Department officials close to Rice consider her comments about Palestinian violence dangerous, and have warned her that if the details of the U.S. program become public her reputation could be stained. In fact, Pentagon officials concede, Hamas's inability to provide security to its own people and the clashes that have recently erupted have been seeded by the Abrams plan. Israeli officials know this, and have begun to rebel. In Israel, at least, Rice's view that Hamas can be unseated is now regularly, and sometimes publicly, dismissed.

According to a December 25 article in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, senior Israeli intelligence officials have told Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that not only can Hamas not be replaced, but that its rival, Fatah, is

disintegrating. Any hope for the success of an American program aimed at replacing Hamas, these officials argued, will fail. These Israeli intelligence officials also dismissed Palestinian President Abu Mazen's call for elections to replace Hamas — saying that such elections would all but destroy Fatah. As *Haaretz* reported: "Shin Bet chief Yuval Diskin told the cabinet Sunday [December 24] that should elections be held in the Palestinian Authority, Fatah's chances of winning would be close to zero. Diskin said during Sunday's weekly cabinet meeting that the Fatah faction is in bad shape, and therefore Israel should expect Hamas to register a sweeping victory."

Apparently Jordan's King Abdullah agrees. On the day this article appeared, December 25, Abdullah kept Palestinian President Abu Mazen waiting for six hours to see him in Amman. Eventually, Abdullah told Abu Mazen that he should go home — and only come to see him again when accompanied by Hamas leader and Palestinian Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh. Most recently, Saudi officials have welcomed Haniyeh to Saudi Arabia for talks, having apparently made public their own views on the American program to replace Hamas. And so it is: one year after the election of Hamas, and one year after Elliot Abrams determined that sowing the seeds of civil war among a people already under occupation would somehow advance America's program for democracy in the Middle East, respect for America's democratic ideals has all but collapsed — and not just in Iraq.

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[...] Update: Thanks to Paul Woodward at Conflicts Forum — the absolutely indispensable project launched by Mark Perry and Alistair Crooke (whose work engaging with the thinking of Hamas, Hizballah and other Islamist groups I have previously highlighted) offering unrivaled perspective based on access to the thinking of groupings that are fast becoming the key force in Middle Eastern politics — do yourself a favor and subscribe to their free updates, because each one contains essential perspective you won't find elsewhere. Anyway, thanks to Conflicts Forum, we now know also that Elliot Abrams, the last of the Likudniks in senior Bush Administration positions, has spoken openly of the need for the U.S. to fund, arm and train Fatah activists to launch a "hard coup" against the elected Hamas government (Abrams, of course, is a veteran of Reagan-era Latin America

policies, so he has some experience in these things.) This is more berserk social engineering from the neocon Likud crowd, and most of the U.S. government (as well as the Israelis) know that the extensive effort to promote a coup are doomed to fail, but fail bloodily. Read the whole thing, it's a fascinating account that confirms all the reasons why even Poppy Bush considers Condi Rice a "disappointment." Even Middle East experts and State Department officials close to Rice consider her comments about Palestinian violence dangerous, and have warned her that if the details of the U.S. program become public her reputation could be stained. In fact, Pentagon officials concede, Hamas's inability to provide security to its own people and the clashes that have recently erupted have been seeded by the Abrams plan. Israeli officials know this, and have begun to rebel. In Israel, at least, Rice's view that Hamas can be unseated is now regularly, and sometimes publicly, dismissed. [...]

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