

Gaza showdown: Behind the Hamas takeover

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

On the morning of January 25, 2006, I was with a group of American churchpeople at a Palestinian Authority polling place in Bethlehem. Having observed many elections over the years, I have learned to detect the difference between enthusiastic reformers hungry for change and members of an old guard, complacent after too many years in power. From what we saw in Bethlehem and heard in the West Bank, we predicted that Hamas would be victorious.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did not share our prediction; the day after the election she called an unusual Saturday morning staff meeting and expressed her frustration over the Hamas victory: “Why was it that nobody saw it coming?” The secretary revealed her lack of understanding of Palestinian politics when she added, “I don’t know anyone who was not caught off guard by Hamas’s strong showing.”

According to Arab journalist Zaki Chehab (*Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement*), two days after the election, Rice flew to London to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, the Middle East conflict and emerging tensions with Iran. Again she claimed that a majority of people were surprised by the election results and added that “some say Hamas itself was caught off guard by Hamas’s strong showing.”

Chehab’s history of Hamas and its closeness to the voters suggests that Rice had spent too much time listening to her pro-Israel advisers. She should have gone into Gaza and the West Bank and talked with Palestinian commentators, who, as Chehab notes, “were bewildered by the ignorance displayed by Rice and other U.S. officials of the depth of hostility felt by Palestinians toward their own leadership and Israel.”

To win the election, Hamas encouraged its base supporters, then found new backing from previously uninvolved young people and women. The organization then identified the waverers and got both waverers and supporters to the polls. It was these voters who made the decision—not outside forces that tried to shape the

outcome. That is the way democracy is supposed to work.

Unfortunately, Secretary Rice lost interest in the democratic process when the Palestinian election did not produce the result she wanted. She persuaded the U.K. and the European Union to join with the U.S. in boycotting the new Hamas legislature and cut off all funds, including \$50 million each month from taxes previously collected by Israel from Palestinians.

The boycotters meekly followed Israel's demand: Hamas would receive no funding until it "recognized Israel's right to exist." This is Israel's current mantra, used to make sure no Palestinian government emerges that is not under Israel's control. Six months after the election, writes Chehab, Israel arrested "no fewer than ten ministers, two dozen members of parliament and a handful of heads of municipalities as well as a large contingent of Hamas senior figures in the West Bank."

Four months before the recent outburst of fighting in Gaza, Time magazine senior editor Tony Karon predicted that Secretary Rice would "cluck regretfully about the violence" and that the U.S. media would concur by covering the event "as if it is part of some inevitable showdown in the preternaturally violent politics of the Palestinians."

Instead, Karon wrote, the conflict is a by-product of Rice's "siege of the Palestinian economy" and of "her savage war on" Palestinian people who chose leaders who do not fit U.S. agendas.

Since the January 2006 election, Israel has made sure that Hamas cannot function as a democratic legislative body. When Fatah and Hamas appeared ready to work as a unified government, the U.S. and Israel continued to block outside funds and enclosed Hamas and Fatah in what one observer called a "giant rat cage" in Gaza. What do angry, hungry rats do in an overcrowded cage? They fight one another until one side prevails.