

## Hamas 'shocked' by Arab participation in ME conference

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Hamas expressed dismay Saturday at Arab foreign ministers' unanimous decision to participate in next week's Middle East peace conference in the United States, saying there could be no justification for taking part as long as Israel retains its hold on Palestinian territory.

"The announcement of the Arabs that they would participate in the Annapolis conference was a great shock for the Palestinian people," Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri, said in a statement. "Participation opens doors for normalization of relations with the Israeli occupiers."

The Arab League on Friday agreed to attend the conference in Annapolis, Maryland, despite failing to get any advance guarantee of Israeli concessions. Saudi Arabia, previously reluctant, said it was also on board.

The Arab countries have put their weight behind Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, in his dispute with Hamas. They also said they were attending because they saw a real chance for Middle East peace.

Hamas, which violently seized control of the Gaza Strip from Abbas security forces in June, is not invited to the conference, and has been rallying public opposition to the event. The group's leaders have also threatened an upsurge in violence against Israel after the conference.

"No matter what the excuses are for participation, they are unacceptable," Abu Zuhri said. "Hamas reiterates that the Palestinian people were expecting a unanimous Arab decision to break the (Israeli) siege, instead of meeting with the occupiers."

Earlier Saturday, Hamas released a statement saying it can make the rockets it fires at Israel much deadlier by packing them with more explosives.

In a statement sent to reporters, Hamas official Ahmed Yousef said that the Kassam rockets currently being fired have "limited effect because they don't carry lethal warheads."

"They can be developed in a short period to create sufficient terror and fear and make the Israelis live in pain no less than what our people live through because of the repeated incursions into our villages and cities in the West Bank and Gaza," wrote Yousef, an adviser to Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh.

Yousef also said Israel has rejected repeated truce offers by Hamas, which seized control of Gaza by force in the summer, prompting Abbas to establish a government in the West Bank.

So far, no difference has been detected in Hamas's rockets. In recent months, it has mainly fired mortars at Israeli troops, while the smaller Islamic Jihad group has been involved in rocket fire.

Israel said Yousef's comments reflect Hamas's intentions to try to torpedo peace efforts. "We take these threats very seriously," said Mark Regev, Israel's Foreign Ministry spokesman.



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