

Al-Qaeda has infiltrated Gaza with help of Hamas, says Abbas



James Hider in Jerusalem

Al-Qaeda militants have infiltrated the Palestinian territories with help from Hamas, according to Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President.

The charges are the most serious yet in the war of words between Mr Abbas, who controls the West Bank, and Hamas, whose Islamist guerrillas expelled his Fatah-dominated security force from the Gaza Strip last summer.

“Al-Qaeda is present in Gaza and I’m convinced that they [Hamas] are their allies,” said Mr Abbas in an interview with al-Hayat, a London-based Arabic newspaper. “I can say without doubt that al-Qaeda is present in the Palestinian territories and that this presence, especially in Gaza, is facilitated by Hamas.”

Israel has long accused al-Qaeda of infiltrating the Palestinian territories. The Israeli army’s intelligence chief said this week that more al-Qaeda members had entered the Gaza Strip after Hamas blew up the wall on the Egyptian border in January.

Mr Abbas’s comments were the first time that such a senior Palestinian statesman has added his weight to the charges.

The accusation came as Hamas fired rockets into a southern Israeli college campus yesterday, killing an Israeli man. Israeli forces carried out a series of strikes in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, killing at least seven suspected militants, including several Hamas senior commanders. Last night Israeli jets struck the offices of Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas Prime Minister, and the nearby premises of his interior ministry. He was not there at the time.

Hamas, a nationalist Islamist organisation whose charter calls for the destruction of Israel, has been at pains to distance itself publicly from the fanatical al-Qaeda. “There is no truth in these allegations,” said Sami Abu Zuhri, a spokesman, in turn accusing Mr Abbas — regarded as an Israeli stooge for his faltering peace negotiations with Jerusalem — of “seeking to mobilise international opinion against Hamas”.

Last year a group calling itself the Army of Islam kidnapped Alan Johnston, a BBC reporter, in Gaza and held him for more than three months while claiming to have links to Osama bin Laden’s organisation. The kidnapping took place before Hamas seized control in June, and the Islamist organisation — which had previously conducted anti-Israeli operations with the Army of Islam — forced it to release Johnston.

Hamas said that the Army of Islam had been financed by Muhammad Dahlan, the hated Fatah security chief in Gaza, who is close to Mr Abbas.

In January, another group calling itself the Army of Believers, Al-Qaeda in Palestine Organisation, ransacked the private American International School. A Christian bookseller was also recently murdered in Gaza, while a gunman shot up a YMCA centre. Western journalists have been alerted to possible kidnap threats.

Some independent analysts believe that al-Qaeda — losing ground in Iraq as local Sunni insurgents reject its ultra-violent tactics — may be seeking to establish itself in new areas. Osama bin Laden said that he was focusing on the protracted Israel-Palestinian conflict in comments disseminated on a jihadist website in December. “We will not recognise a state for the Jews, not even one inch of the land of Palestine. Blood calls for more blood and demolishing calls for further demolishing,” bin Laden said.

The man believed to be the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, this month described Israel as an “evil germ that has infected the body of the Umma [Islamic motherland] and must be extracted”.