

Palestinians at a Cross-Road

Dynamics of Fatah-Hamas Conflict

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Wednesday 13th of June 2007 marks a huge division among Palestinians. On that day open armed confrontation took place between Qassam Brigade, the military arm of Hamas, and what is locally known as the death squad mutineers, an American/Israeli backed militia within Fatah Presidential Security Guards under the leadership of national security chief Mohammad Dahlan.

Many believe that what happened in Gaza Strip was the result of a failure in the American/Israeli policy of supporting Fatah mutineers (Dahlan' death squads) to oppose and to topple Hamas government. Contrary to this belief, what happened in Gaza was exactly what Bush's administration and Israeli government planned for. They set an inescapable trap for Hamas, who was left without any other alternatives but to act in order to put an end to Dahlan's death squads and to enforce security to protect Palestinian citizens. US, Israel, and some Arab leaders are distorting Hamas legitimate action in order to destroy the Hamas resistance phenomenon and to prevent it from spreading to the neighboring Arab countries.

To understand the dynamics of Fatah/Hamas conflict we need to go back in history to the first Gulf War when Iraqi Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Arafat, then, made the fatal mistake of openly supporting Saddam's invasion. He was hoping for more financial support from Saddam that he, then, gained control over the largest oil resources in the region. Unfortunately for Arafat the Iraqis were ousted from Kuwait, and the Gulf States, who used to finance Arafat, had boycotted him for his support to Saddam. This boycott dried up Arafat's financial resources, that led some of his officials gathering whatever money is left, closing PLO offices in some countries and abandoning the movement.

During the 1993 Oslo negotiations between the Arabs and Israelis Arafat broke away from the Arab negotiating team, went behind his own Palestinian negotiating team, and signed the Oslo Accord with shady conditions in order to hasten the receipt of badly needed money from Western donor countries. To assure the flow of such money Arafat and his Fatah officials had to follow the dictate of these donor countries and to give Israel free political concessions one after the other.

On their entrance (return) to Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip Fatah officials hastened to strengthen their positions through gaining monopolies over Palestinian economical resources, and through business partnerships with Israel as per donor countries' conditions. Those "returnees" started accumulating money, living in luxurious homes, buying people's loyalties, and abusing their political positions. The local Palestinian leaderships were left with very few positions, and many of those who acquired any position had to sell their loyalty to Fatah. The Palestinian Authority (PA) had become a mediatory Israeli tool to

execute Israeli policies through seemingly Palestinian apparatus. Corruption prevailed within Fatah PA.

Although Arafat gave Israel political concessions there were certain matters (status of Jerusalem and refugees right of return) that he could not compromise for fear of losing his status and branded as a traitor. In the 2000 Camp David Summit with American President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Barak, Arafat refused to compromise on these matters (so called Israel's generous offer). A more lenient collaborative replacement was sought for, and Mahmoud Abbas was appointed as Palestinian Prime Minister under the pressure of the donor countries. On June 4th 2003 while meeting with President Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Aqaba, Jordan, Abbas showed in his speech the sought-for "understanding" of the Israeli position. Yet Arafat did not grant Abbas any political power, so he resigned his position.

More drastic measures were taken by Israel to discredit and to pressure Arafat. Israeli intelligence supported the then weak Hamas faction in Gaza in order to oppose Arafat's Fatah. Unfortunately for Israel Hamas was joined and led by many Palestinian patriots, who were committed to resisting Israeli occupation until independence for all Palestine is achieved. Hamas focused its resistance against Israel, and lately became so powerful enough to control Palestinian Parliament and Prime Ministry.

Israel had also supported Muhammad Dahlan, a collaborator who was enlisted while in Israeli jails, evicted from the Occupied Territories to join Fatah, and to become the Chief of Security Guards. Dahlan tried to discredit Arafat (the old man as he used to call him), but his Coup failed even before the start due to Arafat's tight grip on all divisions of Security Guards. So Israel sent its tanks to destroy most of Arafat's Ramallah headquarters and to imprison him in his office. Yet Arafat did not give in, his popularity was strengthened, and he was visited by many European political figures and even by Israeli sympathizers. Arafat then was poisoned.

To guarantee the success of "moderate" Abbas in 2005 Palestinian Presidential election to replace Arafat the Bush administration financed Abbas, the Israeli government arrested his strongest local Palestinian competitor Marwan Barghouti, and restricted the movement of the other candidates. With Hamas' boycott of election and with Fatah controlled Palestinian TV giving Abbas 94% of electoral campaign time, Abbas was elected president.

During the next year corruption of Fatah officials became rampant. Money from the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR) funds had disappeared and not accounted for, tax revenues of the border crossings were siphoned into Dahlan's private Israeli bank accounts, the then Prime Minister Ahmad Qurie's cement sale to Israeli contractors to build the imprisoning apartheid wall, and the smuggling of millions of cash money of Fatah's officials outside the country had led the people to lose trust in the PA and to demand reform. The donor countries decided to freeze their donations until more accountable process is established.

The Palestinians expressed their dissatisfaction with Fatah in the Parliamentary election in January 2006, when they elected Hamas leaderships (by 42%) to form the government. With all the American/Israeli support Fatah leaderships lost election due to their corruption and collaboration with Israel, while Hamas won due to their resistance to occupation, their social services, and their charity they provided to the people. The election process was strictly

scrutinized by international observers (including ex-President Jimmy Carter), who testified that it was democratic, free and honest election.

The result of the election caught everybody by surprise including Hamas themselves, who expected to win few seats in the Parliament and not the majority. Immediately Hamas invited all the Palestinian factions to form a unity government, but Fatah and the rest of the factions turned their backs on this offer for fear that Hamas would eventually fail due to American rejection.

The Bush administration, the self-proclaimed defender and spreader of democracy in the New Middle Eastern region, did not like Palestinian democracy. So it backed the Israeli government and Fatah's rejectionists to apply pressure on the new Hamas government to renounce resistance "violence", recognize Israel's right to exist "on usurped Palestinian land", and to accept previous "unreasonable and unjust" agreements with Israel. Hamas rejected these demands.

The decision came to starve Palestinians in order to cripple, discredit and to topple Hamas government. Before the establishment of the new government the old Fatah Parliament gave President Abbas more constitutional power. Abbas also hastened to double the number of his Presidential Security Forces. The Bush administration struck financial, economical, and political sanctions against Hamas government, and forced EU, the Quartet, and Arab countries to join in otherwise face financial isolation. The administration, under the supervision of General Keith Dayton, formulated a plan to finance Abbas, train his Security forces in Jericho, in Jordan, and in Egypt, and send in death squads, under the leadership of Security Chief Muhammad Dahlan, to spread terror, assassinations, and "creative chaos" to force Hamas to react. This reaction is expected to incite civil war as Dayton has opined in his Congress session late last May. This plan was revealed by Public Affairs and Department Spokesman Sean McCormack on 22nd of last December when he declared Washington's readiness to provide PA with large shipment of weapons to topple Hamas government. The author of the plan was Bush's Deputy National Security Advisor Elliot Abrams, who on 7th of last January called for a "hard coup" to overthrow Hamas.

Dahlan's death squads started terrorizing people in Gaza. They attacked Hamas government buildings, torched Hamas charitable institutions and social services centers, attacked mosque goers, burned educational and cultural centers, assassinated Hamas resistance members, and fired automatic weapons randomly in the streets to terrorize people. Many times they engaged members of Qassam Brigade. They also had kidnapped foreigners and media reporters then let Dahlan release them as a show of his own influence. Arab mediations interfered many times to solve what was termed power struggle between Hamas and Fatah. Representatives of both factions met with Arab mediators in Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia to come up with agreements that usually did not last except for few days, after which the death squads would start their terror again.

The death squads started targeting Hamas officials. PA Minister of prisoner's affairs, Wasfi Quebha, escaped assassination attempt when his car was strafed with bullets. On 13th of last December Judge Bassam Al Farra was assassinated in Gaza. On the 14th Palestinian Prime Minister, Isma'el Haniyeh, himself was the target of a failed assassination attempt while entering Gaza from his Gulf trip. On the 17th of the same month there was another failed assassination attempt against Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar. Hamas leaders sent letters to President Abbas naming members of the death squads, who took camp in Presidential compound in Gaza and used it as prison and torture centers, and asking him to

use his influence to put an end to Dahlan's death squads. Yet Abbas did not give them any attention. In Mecca meeting Hamas offered to share power with Fatah in a form of a Unity Government to address security issues in Gaza. This Unity Government did not live long; Hani Qawasmi, the newly assigned Interior Minister charged with security reforms, turned in his resignation due to the many hurdles he met from Presidential Guards.

The beginning of month of June ushers what seems to be a preparation for a coup against Hamas government into Gaza. On the 2nd of June Hamas Interior Ministry in a press conference expressed its concern about armored military vehicles secretly crossing the borders and stationing in Presidential compound in Gaza. It was revealed that on Friday 6/1 ten large arms shipments were transported from Jericho to Gaza under the protection of the Israeli army. On Thursday 6/7 eye witnesses reported that several hundreds of members of Fatah's Badr Brigade had crossed Rafah crossing into Gaza to join the 450 others, who preceded them in May 16th.

A wave of assassinations of Hamas cadre followed, Muslim Imams and their mosques were targeted, some Hamas ministers were also targeted, families of Hamas martyrs were attacked, 12 of their houses were burned and demolished Israeli style and their businesses were looted and torched, and finally the house of Prime Minister Isma'el Haniyeh was targeted with missiles. The death squads, emboldened with enforcements, attacked civilian homes and businesses openly and uncovered without their usual masks. They were led by Samih al-Madhoun, Dahlan's thug, who was executed later for his many crimes against civilians.

The latest terror wave was the straw that broke the camel's back. Hamas' patience ran out and they could not take it any more. To protect themselves and Gaza citizens Hamas was forced to take the last resort of acting pre-emptively to get rid of Dahlan's death squads and Fatah's mutineers to avert a possible overthrow of the elected government. To avoid any misconceptions Hamas declared that since President Abbas has not taken any steps to improve security in Gaza it had taken these security measures against the death squads to secure the safety of the people who elected them to do so, and that their action was not directed against Fatah per se. Hamas officials demanded to take Dahlan to court for his crimes citing documented evidence for his treason found in the Presidential compound.

Abbas rejected these claims. Circumventing the Palestinian constitution and bypassing the Palestinian Parliamentary Council Abbas dissolved Hamas government, declared emergency state, and appointed emergency government headed by Salam Fayyad. Abbas claimed that Hamas wants to establish an Islamic Taliban-like "Hamas-stan" in Gaza. He accused Hamas of revolting against the Palestinian legitimacy forgetting that this legitimacy was given to Hamas through election. He refused to negotiate with Hamas to solve the conflict while begging for negotiations with Ehud Olmert the real enemy of Palestinians. Olmert rewarded Abbas by accepting the emergency government as a real partner for peace negotiation, and by releasing Palestinian tax money to "improve" the lives of West Bank Palestinians.

Jordan and Egypt recognized the legitimacy of Fayyad's government. Jordan offered to send Badr Brigade to Ramallah to help Dahlan secure the West Bank. Dahlan had already regrouped his Security Forces in Ramallah and sent them to attack and seize all Hamas institutions throughout the West Bank. They raided homes kidnapping and imprisoning Hamas leaders and supporters. They torched 180 Hamas social services, cultural, religious, and educational centers.

The Bush administration supported Abbas unconstitutional decrees, accepted his emergency government as legitimate, decided to back him financially, and to provide his Security Guards with more weapons to fight Hamas. The administration also had sent Jacob Walles (Jake) to the West Bank as a High Commissioner to support Fayyad's government.

The EU had followed the Bush administration in recognizing Fayyad's government. It promised to end its financial sanctions, and to pour more financial donations to the newly yet unconstitutional government.

Once more it seems that the American administration has successfully toppled another democratically elected government. Palestinians in Gaza seem to face another Nekba (catastrophe). This time it is not only the international community that conspired against them, but also their own leaders and brothers.

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