

Squeezing Palestinians into Impossible Mission

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Global Research, April 11, 2007

11 April 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

The Israeli 40-year old military occupation and the more than a year old economic siege are eroding the national existence of Palestinians and squeezing the Palestinian leadership into an almost impossible mission of securing law and order by practically renewing an old plan thwarted because, in the end, it could not secure individual safety in the absence of national safeguards.

Controlling the security chaos is the second most important priority after lifting the economic siege according to the platform of the new “national unity” government of the autonomous Palestinian Authority (PA), whose cabinet discussed in a special session in Gaza City on April 8 a 100-day security plan presented by interior minister, Hani al-Qawasmeh, in a bid to enforce law and order especially in the Israeli-besieged Gaza Strip, but, contrary to expectations, did not decide any action on the plan and instead postponed discussing how to implant it to another cabinet meeting next week.

Within the context of military occupation and economic siege, a prevailing “security vacuum” originally resulted from power struggle among more than 10 security agencies, which took roots after the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank in 2002 and the redeployment of the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) to the periphery of the Gaza Strip in 2005, both events that were accompanied by the Israeli destruction of the Palestinian security infrastructure that was built with the scarce money of the western and Arab donors.

The emanating “security chaos” was exacerbated further by the landslide electoral victory of the Islamic Resistance Movement “Hamas” in the January 2006 legislative election and deteriorated more by the Israeli and US-led western boycott that followed. The pressures of reoccupation and siege have weakened the PA to the verge of financial insolvency and non-governance and expectedly created a security vacuum that was filled by convergence to clan, tribal and religious search for communal security and personal safety while economic insecurity created the right environment conducive to illegal activities.

More than 50 unofficial armed groups, some mafias and well-armed clans have stepped in and appear to be consolidating control over key neighbourhoods in Gaza Strip, according to Professor Iyad Barghuthi, who runs a Palestinian human rights group: “Each one of the 53 (groups) wants to show that he has the power and he can do whatever he likes,” he said. (1)

Member of the PLO Executive Committee and former minister of culture and information, Yasser Abed Rabbo, confirmed there are indicators of a serious problem in the Gaza Strip, including “establishing camps and building militias. No one knows who is the authority. The Gaza Strip is full of thugs and gangsters who are responsible for the ongoing anarchy. Soon the Gaza Strip may be declared a dangerous zone, which means that all international organizations would have to leave.” Chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, warned that a

“dangerous zone” declaration would increase the suffering of the Gazans. (2) Muhammad Dahlan, who was recently appointed PA National Security Adviser, said it was time to admit that a “curse has hit” the Gaza Strip and “the situation is catastrophic and many young men prefer to work for clans and not the security forces.”

Palestinian Justice Minister, Ali Sartawi, an Islamist and Hamas appointment to the position, confirmed his PLO official colleagues and warned that the family clans and gangs in Gaza have become so powerful that Palestinian security forces can no longer control them: “Because of the power of the families, and because of the power of the Dogmush family and its strength and huge numbers, to take action against such a family ... would put the Palestinian interior minister in a very difficult position. If the interior minister takes action alone against this family and all the suspects, the result will be catastrophic.” (3)

The security chaos was highlighted by the kidnapping of BBC reporter, Alan Johnston, 44, in Gaza city on March 12th, in the longest captivity a foreign journalist has endured in Gaza over the past three years. The Dogmush family, who is thought to have a militia of about 2,000 men, is suspected of abducting him and was blamed for the abduction of two Fox TV journalists held for two weeks last summer; the family denied these accusations. “This has become a country of mafia,” said Hani Habeeb, a sociologist with Gaza’s al-Azhar University.

100-day Security Plan

The ambitious 100-day security plan relies on clan bosses and anti-Israeli faction leaders agreeing to permit prosecution of members who break the law. Interior minister al-Qawasmeh held talks with clan chieftains in Gaza who expressed alarm at the behaviour of their young militias, which justice minister Sartawi called an “encouraging sign.”

The plan, according to cabinet’s spokesman, Ghazi Hammad, includes instant procedures to deploy security forces to contain abductions, thefts, fratricide and clan feuds and long-term ones, which envisions an amalgamation of faction militias into one security force, and more financial support and training to build up pride in the force and mitigate clan loyalties. But attempts to combine militia forces have been tried before and failed miserably in as much as did reform plans to unify the twelve security agencies into three major forces. These long term goals were targeted as early as 26 June 2002, when the PA published a 100-Day Plan for Reforms; only the financial reforms had the chance to materialize under the former minister of finance, Salam Fayyadh, who holds now the same portfolio.

President Mahmoud Abbas appointed his security adviser Dahlan, now a Fatah legislator, to head up the National Security Council amid controversial protests by their ruling coalition partner Hamas, indicating a residual simmering rivalry. However clashes between the two rival movements that have claimed at least 4000 Palestinian lives were defused as a major source of insecurity thanks to the mediation of Saudi Arabia whose King Abdullah sponsored the signing of the Mecca agreement on February 8 on the basis of which the new “national unity” government was approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) on March 17.

Violence-breeding Incubator

But there remains the overall violence-breeding incubator of the prevailing security chaos.

First, the blurred national role of the PA security apparatus is eroding public confidence in this role. Externally what is the point in having more than 80,000 of national security

personnel when they could not stand up to the IOF to defend their people or at least make their daily onslaughts with a price? Internally, according to Hassan Khraisheh, deputy speaker of the PLC, “What’s the point in having 85,000 security officers if they can’t free a foreign journalist who has been held in the Gaza Strip for three weeks?” The PA has become the most heavily policed territory in the world, with an officer-to-resident ratio of 1:50; compared to 1:400 in the United States, according to one estimate.

Second, disarming all but the government is a security prerogative, but it will not certainly be a very popular move by the PA to disarm people of personal and overwhelmingly primitive self-defence weapons while they are still under Israeli occupation and their “national” security forces are practically unable and politically committed not to defend them against the ongoing military incursions, extra-judicial assassinations (dubbed by the Israelis “targeted killings”), house demolitions and mass arrests.

Third, the absence of what the US Administration and PA officials have been recently fond of describing as “political horizon,” the deadlocked “vision” of a two-state solution, Israel’s undermining of the Road Map and her rejection of the Arab Peace Initiative are all factors contributing to a destabilizing no-war-no-peace situation that is playing on an already edgy Palestinian nerves and their collective sense of insecurity.

Fourth, the economic and financial siege imposed on Palestinians by the Quartet of the UN, US, EU and Russia is eating at their threatened existential survival. One-third of Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied territories are food insecure, according to a “Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment” published in March by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); most affected is the Gaza Strip, where 51 percent of the population suffers from food insecurity. Karen Koning AbuZayd, the commissioner general of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, told an IRIN reporter on March 31 that the humanitarian crisis in the West Bank and Gaza is “worse than ever.”

Fifth, The World Bank compared the Palestinian current recession to the Great Depression of 1929. Approximately 10,000 have emigrated from the territories, and approximately 50,000 have applied to do so. Production has been lost due to outright destruction of physical infrastructure and assets by the IOF and the Quartet boycott. A joint study by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) late in March said the Israeli military hits on Palestinian infrastructure brought local production to its knees. Dozens of factories migrated to Jordan and scores of businessmen moved abroad to doom the private sector to a situation worse than the public sector. Of course foreign investment is tantamount to nil. This writer personally knows of PLO leaders who are harassed by their landlords because they could not pay their rentals and of PLO ambassadors who have been managing on their own for months. “Today, almost two-thirds of the Palestinian population lives in poverty, with per-capita income at 60% of its level in 1999,” Salam Fayyadh said.

Sixth, the insistence of the major western “democracies” on ruling out recognition of the outcome of a democratically-elected Palestinian leadership and on dealing selectively with the government emanating thereof, is a premeditated policy to reignite a Palestinian divide that a few months ago threatened a civil war, thus exacerbating the popular sense of insecurity. It was noteworthy that the US original pledge of \$86 million for PA security forces loyal to President Abbas was announced on April 10 to be only \$43 million earmarked solely for the Palestinian Presidential Guard (PPG), which is not the direct instrumental force to enforce law and order.

Seventh, the economic siege is also eroding public confidence in the financial accountability of the PA; the donors' aid selectively channelled to bypass the PA Ministry of Finance is nowhere transparent to be accounted for: "The money coming in can no longer be traced, and we cannot ensure that it is not being misappropriated," Fayyadh said. This state of affairs is fuelling a chronic PA grievance with rumours about corruption, at a time when older corruption cases are officially still pending judicial prosecution.

This state of affairs will inevitably contribute to further insecurity and will more likely squeeze the Palestinian leadership into an almost impossible mission of securing law and order; citizen's security will continue to be wishful thinking as long as the national security and sovereignty are missing, in as much as democracy is impossibly unattainable if not practiced in a free liberated homeland.

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Notes

(1) National Public Radio -NPR, April 3, 2007.

(2) Jerusalem Post, Apr. 5, 2007.

(3) Sunday Telegraph, April 7, 2007.

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