

Fighting in the Gaza ghetto

By Jon Elmer

When Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 after six months of increasingly violent clashes with the security forces of its rival Fatah, it was neither a coup nor a civil war.

To be sure, there were times when Gaza convulsed with a type of street-by-street fighting that gave the air of civil war. Gunmen took up positions on the rooftops and balconies of high-rise apartments in Gaza City. Makeshift checkpoints became sand-bagged bunkers, and more than once in the winter of 2007, life in the long-battered enclave ground to a halt.

Yet the fighting cannot so easily or broadly be characterized as Hamas versus Fatah, much less civil war. Significant elements of both movements opposed the confrontation, as did the overwhelming majority of Palestinians.

What happened in June was, instead, a focused and purposeful takeover of a flawed and failed security apparatus created by the United States and Israel; a security apparatus that was explicitly born, armed, trained and tasked to protect Israel's interests. For more than a decade, at the behest of Israel and the US, it arrested, imprisoned and tortured Palestinians engaging in resistance to Israel's creeping occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Most importantly, the conflict in June was the takeover of a security apparatus that was openly aligned with Israel and the US designs to overthrow the elected Hamas government.

BORN OUT OF OSLO

The principle target of Hamas' takeover of Gaza was the network of paramilitary forces born out of the so-called Oslo peace process and the establishment of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), particularly the Presidential Guard and the Preventative Security Service. Under the direct leadership of the CIA and Washington's favourite 'strongman' in the Palestinian arena, Mohammed Dahlan, the security forces became a symbol of a discredited Palestinian Authority regime that failed to achieve sovereignty for the Palestinians while creating a bloated and corrupt network of patronage and extraordinary personal enrichment for its officials.

As Martin Indyk, a key advisor to President Clinton and US ambassador to Israel during the 1990s, bluntly told a congressional hearing: "I'm quite sure it is not a secret that the Central Intelligence Agency played a critical role in training Arafat's security forces."

With a security force totaling more than 80,000 members, Palestinians have the highest ratio of official security personnel to population on the planet. Yet for Palestinians, this hardly translated to anything like security - no legitimate courts, no effective dispute resolution mechanisms - only an increasingly violent Israeli occupation that Palestinians themselves were being asked to police. Hamas activists were routinely tortured and humiliated in the jail cells of the Preventative Security forces. According to the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, 31 Palestinians died in PA custody between 1995 and 2000.

Despite the torture and repression, under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantisi, Hamas refused to fight the PA. "We shall never clash with the Authority, even if they torture us, even if they shut down our institutions, arrest us, even if they kill us," Yassin wrote in Hamas' newspaper in November 1997. In many ways, it was such discipline by Hamas that prevented, or indeed postponed, the internal conflict fostered by the pressure cooker of Israel's occupation.

THE ELECTION OF HAMAS

The uprising that began in September of 2000, and Israel's comprehensive and brutal suppression of it, moved the internal power struggle largely off the agenda. Israel's pullout from Gaza and Hamas' decisive election victory in the West Bank and Gaza in January of 2006, however, has led to a reinvigorated engagement with PA security forces as the US and Israel has sought to pressure the Palestinians to overthrow Hamas.

Immediately following their election defeat, Fatah rejected Hamas' offer to form a government of national unity and set about undermining the newly elected government in concert with the US, Israel, Canada and the EU. The Fatah-dominated security forces refused to take orders from Hamas, and western capitals began the crippling boycott. "Not a red cent to Hamas," Peter MacKay said in Ottawa, throwing Canada's weight behind what the UN has called history's first sanctions regime enforced on an occupied population.

The result has been a catastrophe for Palestinians. A recent UN human rights report describes a "carefully managed" humanitarian crisis, a "controlled strangulation that apparently falls within the generous limits of international toleration."

THE KARNI PROJECT

Insofar as the sanctions were intended to pressure the Palestinians into overthrowing Hamas, they failed. By the fall of 2006, the US began rebuilding the Palestinian security forces to confront Hamas. Under the guidance of US "security coordinator" Lt Gen Keith Dayton, the US openly began training what were in practice anti-government paramilitaries loyal to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Dahlan.

Rice bluntly characterized the motive of arming PA forces on Voice of America: "I do know that if Hamas has strong forces and Mahmoud Abbas does not, that's not good for the United States, it is not good for the Palestinians, and it is most certainly not good for Israel."

While occasionally denying that the intent was to confront Hamas, the Dayton Plan was no secret. Dayton told Israel's largest newspaper, *Yediot Abaranot*, "we are involved in building up the Presidential Guard, instructing it, assisting it to build itself up and giving them ideas."

State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack told reporters in November 2006: "You have Keith Dayton, General Dayton on the ground, who continues to work on the real down-in-the-weeds blocking and tackling work of helping build up the security forces. Now, that may not be very newsworthy in terms of big headlines flashed across the newspaper or the lead story on the nightly news, but it's important and essential work."

Officially dubbed the Karni Project, the plan went beyond simply training security forces. It was, and is, a model for Palestinians policing Israel's occupation regime. The objective is to train Palestinians to administer the border crossings and commercial terminals of the newly cemented Palestinian ghettos (Karni being the name of the major commercial border terminal into Gaza from Israel).

Gaza was the first Palestinian ghetto surrounded by concrete walls, but the 700 km wall that Israel is building in Palestinian territory is creating a series of smaller Gazas in the West Bank. Such objectives are neither covert, nor clandestine. The plans were discussed by top officials and aired openly in the media. A *Jerusalem Post* headline declared the Karni project the "acid test of Abbas' abilities" and concluded that Karni "could be a prototype for running Palestine".

CANADA'S ROLE

On his first visit to the region as foreign minister, Peter MacKay waded into the heart of the conflict, immediately meeting in Jerusalem with Lt General Keith Dayton and offering \$1.2 million dollars to support the General's mission. Canada's involvement, however, goes beyond money. According to the CBC "about a fifth of Dayton's staff" are Canadian, and Condoleezza Rice told reporters in a briefing alongside MacKay in Jerusalem that Dayton "has a Canadian counterpart with whom he works very closely."

During MacKay's visit, Israel's foreign ministry praised "the exceedingly warm relations enjoyed" between the two countries. Particularly, Israel lauded Canada's vocal boycott of Hamas, as well as its diplomatic posture opposing a ceasefire in the summer of 2006 as Israel set about the ruination of large swaths of Lebanon, and its position "in the vanguard" of the fight against Iran. On the three biggest issues of the day, Canada is in lock-step with Israel. During MacKay's visit, the Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement which said in part: "our message in the region is clear."

THE TAKEOVER

Despite being heavily outnumbered, the military superiority of Hamas' fighters (considered to be about 10,000-strong) was never in doubt. Yet the ease with which they overran the PA security apparatus was notable and its impact on the security of

Gaza's streets was dramatic. On June 12, Hamas began to systematically take control of the bases and headquarters of the Palestinian Authority's Preventative Security and Presidential Guard. In less than three days of concentrated attacks, Hamas fighters had full control of the Gaza Strip.

For Hamas, the takeover was more than a settling of scores; it was a government asserting its legitimate authority in territory it was elected to administer. It was acting, as Hamas repeatedly said, to preempt an openly planned coup led by Dayton and the PA security apparatus.

In fact, Hamas' takeover of Gaza precipitated what was to be the real coup, as Abbas immediately declared a state of emergency, suspended the Palestinian charter, and illegally ousted Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and the Hamas parliament. Having apparently cut Gaza loose, Abbas then appointed former IMF and World Bank official Salam Fayyad as Prime Minister in the West Bank, where Hamas is still far stronger than Fatah, though forced largely underground by daily Israeli military raids.

As they did throughout the 1990s, the security forces of Abbas have worked in close coordination with Israel's occupation regime to keep Hamas on the defensive. The Palestinian Authority government and civil society employees - including doctors - have been forced to strike by Abbas and Fayyad in order to receive their paycheques, crippling the Hamas government. If Palestinian government employees go to work, they forfeit their salary indefinitely.

Abbas issued a decree in September that closed more than 100 Hamas charities and civil society organizations - many of the very same social welfare organizations that so importantly contributed to Hamas' popularity and helped to establish the movement's deep roots in Palestinian society, particularly in Gaza. "Civil society is not sacred," Sumud Damiri, a spokesman for Abbas' interior ministry coldly declared.

Between June 15 and October 15, some 600 Palestinians were arrested and many were tortured, according to the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens Rights. Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas legislator, recorded 755 attacks on Hamas institutions of all sorts - clubs, libraries, charities - in the first forty days after the Gaza takeover. In effect, the very same anti-democratic and collaborationist postures that resulted in Fatah's resounding electoral defeat in 2006 are being deepened by Abbas and Fayyad in the West Bank.

That Palestinians find their aspirations for self-determination once again abandoned to a violent and expanding Israeli occupation can hardly come as a surprise. That the internationally supported regime of sanctions, internal clashes and collective punishment was predicated by democratic elections only compounds the bitterness.

Jon Elmer, a Canadian photojournalist, covered the Hamas-Fatah conflict from Gaza City between December 2006 and February 2007.