

# Gaza and the West Bank and the Source of Recent Problems in Palestine

Keys

## Daoud Kuttab

Founder of the Arab world's first Internet radio, AmmanNet  
Ferris Professor of Journalism at Princeton University

Med. 2008

24

My professional colleague Ayman Bardawil, who was born and raised in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, has been living in Ramallah ever since he attended Bir Zeit University, where he got his civil engineering degree. In the past ten years Ayman has worked in television and specifically in animation, and the times he has visited his parents and his siblings' family and friends are fewer than the fingers of his artistic hands. His requests to visit Gaza have often been rejected by the Israelis "because there is no compelling humanitarian reason," an Israeli officer would tell him.

When Ayman's father lay terminally sick in the summer of 2006 he did get permission from the Israelis to visit. A day after he had returned to Ramallah after his permit expired, his father died and he was unable to travel. Ayman has since moved to Jordan but now, instead of his wanting to visit his family, his mother is looking for ways to escape Gaza.

When Israel was established in 1948 thousands of Palestinians were dispersed, mostly in the nearby West Bank, Gaza, Jordan's East Bank, Syria and Lebanon. Jordan soon annexed the West Bank, giving Palestinians (refugees or not) Jordanian citizenship. In Gaza, which was quickly overcrowded with refugees, Egypt held the area but Palestinians in Gaza were given travel documents stating that their citizenship is undetermined. Palestinian access to Egypt was restricted, and much of the region's largely unskilled workforce was dependent on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which built and maintained the local refugee camps.

But while in the West bank land was plentiful and a variety of jobs were possible for Palestinians, Gaza's

economic improvement was superficial. Land and water were limited. One third of its land was closed off to make room for a few thousand Jewish settlers. Gaza's income was largely dependent on workers commuting daily to Israel. At one time over one hundred and fifty thousand Gazans were crossing the Erez checkpoint daily to go and work in Israel and come home at night.

The poverty of Gaza was fertile ground for political activism. Pan Arabism was followed by Palestinian nationalism and finally Islamic militancy. Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, a paraplegic refugee from the village of Jora (now in Israel) north of the Gaza Strip, worked quietly for some time to build up a grass-roots movement. For the most part his initial effort was allowed to continue because the Israeli army wanted to encourage an alternative to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), whose members were actively resisting the Israeli occupation. Once the Intifada broke out, Yasin's supporters announced the creation of the Islamic Resistance Movement, better known by its Arabic acronym Hamas. They combined calls for strikes with militarily amateurish attacks on Jewish settlers as well as kidnapping of Israeli soldiers to compete strongly with the predominantly secular PLO groups.

While the first Intifada brought about the Oslo process and the return of the PLO leadership, it failed to produce any real economy in Gaza. High-rise buildings were now evident and with the Palestinian Authority having been allowed to bring with them small arms as part of the agreement with Israel, others like Hamas acquired their own weapons mostly by buying them from Israeli soldiers or on the Israeli black market. Sometime they traded drugs smuggled into Gaza from Sinai for weapons and ammunition. Later, after the Israelis withdrew from Gaza, the tunnel system brought weapons directly from Sinai to Gaza.

The second Palestinian Intifada which erupted in 2000 saw Hamas use the weapons they had amassed

to attack Israelis, and to create their own small protectorate. But the more Hamas and others attacked Israelis, the more the Israelis tightened the siege on Gaza. Within a few years into the 21st century the number of Gazan workers in Israel had been reduced to a few hundred. Along with the rise of poverty and unemployment there was a rise of armed factions, gangs and warlords. The absence of work left young people with little choice but to join whichever group would allow one to have weapons or get some money for being part of this or that militia. The elections of 2006 that swept Hamas into power also produced an international siege that overnight stopped the salaries of all public servants.

With Gazans unable to go to work in Israel and without any resources for economic viability, the Palestinians of Gaza remained totally dependent on the state of Israel, even though Israeli soldiers had left the streets of Gaza and the alleyways of its squalid refugee camps. The fact that Gaza was closed physically and economically meant that with the exception of access to Israeli society (which was mostly as cheap labourers) Gazans were not exposed to other cultures and other experiences.

As the majority of the residents of Gaza were refugees (70%), they naturally had little in the way of family or social roots. Unlike West Bankers (only 10% of whose population are refugees), who still owned the land that they worked and whose population is largely rural, Gazans were living in overpopulated cities where the gun rather than the community was king. Remittances were sent back to the family, but for most young people, having a gun was the only job they understood and which gave them power.

## The fact that Gaza was closed physically and economically meant that Gazans were not exposed to other cultures and other experiences

Jerusalem, as a religious, cultural and economic centre of the West Bank provided a cosmopolitan atmosphere that is not present in Gaza. Leading higher educational institutes like Bir Zeit University played a role in cultural openness. My colleague Ayman who studied at Bir Zeit and met Hania, decided to officially move to Ramallah. Most Gazans, however, did not have such a privilege. Once Gaza was besieged, employ-

ment in Israel ended. Two competing military factions for a while were busy resisting the Israeli occupation, but when Israel withdrew Gaza was not opened up either to the West Bank or to Egypt, and a cultural regression began. People like the Bardawils, who had set up in Ramallah, finally moved to Jordan where they got work and a better environment to raise their children.

Meanwhile in Gaza, the desperation and the lack of progress in the peace process coupled with the world's turning a blind eye to the Palestinians forced the two major Palestinian groups into an ugly civil war. Information now published in Vanity Fair points to a US-funded effort to help the Palestinian secular movement, Fatah, to oust, even by violence, the Hamas militants whose civilian leaders had won the parliamentary elections in February 2006.

The senseless killings between Palestinians have hurt the Palestinian cause. Palestinians in the West Bank, where it is rumoured that all available weapons and ammunitions have been purchased by militants from one faction or the other, are bracing for possibly some hard days ahead.

The Palestinians have no-one to blame but themselves. Despite the economic and travel embargo that has been placed on Gaza, there is little that anyone can say to explain such madness. The way that attempts at self-government have been carried out leaves little hope for successful peace talks. An outside observer can easily ask: "If you Palestinians can't learn how to administer power fairly and how to apply the rule of law and understand the meaning of power-sharing and the rotation of power in Gaza, what guarantee is there that you can do that in the rest of the Palestinian territories?"

While the current fighting is a black spot in Palestinian history, some contextualization is necessary. In the next month the Palestinian territories (namely Gaza and the West Bank including Jerusalem) would have been under a foreign, at times very brutal, military occupation that has violated international law by moving Jewish populations into homes built on expropriated Palestinian lands in these areas. The fourth Geneva Convention specifically forbids an occupying power to move its people into areas under occupation.

Since the Israelis left Gaza, the only open border for the over one million Palestinians living there has been closed for many more days than it has been open. The Israelis say they regularly close the Rafah crossing point because of the still unresolved problem regarding the imprisonment of an Israeli soldier. Again

such action constitutes collective punishment and is a violation of international law. Furthermore the unjust economic siege in which the international banking system prohibits a single penny from being transferred to an account of the Palestinian Authority has caused extreme poverty and unemployment. With little hope in the present or the future it is only to be expected that the environment should be conducive to chaos such as we see at present.

The Mecca accords between Hamas and Fatah resulted in an agreement in which the dominant legislative power (Hamas) agreed to grant power in order to please the international community and break the unjust economic siege. But, three months into the new national-unity government, no breakthrough with the siege has been witnessed.

Sources from Gaza indicate that the major problem with the current round of fighting was instigated by some of the hard-line officials who were asked to leave in order to make room for the national unity government. Some of these leaders are asking themselves and their comrades what is the sense of sharing power with Fatah if the latter has been unable to deliver the lifting of the economic siege.

One can certainly argue that Hamas cannot put the blame on Fatah for the continuation of the siege. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly said that the commitments made by Hamas in Mecca were not enough. It was hoped that they would continue in the path of moderation by moving closer to the demands of the international community.

Whatever arguments are made by this or that person, the pictures coming out of Gaza are not pleasant for anyone supporting the Palestinian cause. As Palestinians were remembering 59 years since the *nakbeh* (catastrophe) when the Palestinian refugee problem was born, local Palestinian newspapers ran eight column headlines in black and red calling what is happening in Gaza, a new *nakbeh*. But while remembering the *nakbeh* is supposed to remind the world of the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their lands and homes, the new *nakbeh* is threatening to make the dream of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as difficult as the right of return is becoming.

One year after the Hamas parliamentary elections and months after internal fighting an agreement was reached in February 2007 in the Saudi holy city of Mecca. The Mecca *sulha* (reconciliation) signed between the leaders of the two major Palestinian groups, Hamas and Fatah, is being hailed as a major politi-

cal breakthrough. But the national unity Palestinian government created as a result of this agreement has many daunting internal and external challenges. The Mecca agreement needs to be followed up with an effort to end the economic and administrative siege of Palestine and with serious peace talks with the aim of ending the 39-year-old occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The new government needs to pay its civil servants, restore law and order and end the lawlessness that has become the norm of life in the Palestinian territories.

It is clear to many that the internal fighting in Palestine began in part due to the political impasse caused after Israel and the international community decided to place an economic embargo on the Palestinian Authority. The unjust economic siege which has been religiously enforced by the world banking system (including Arab and Islamic banks) was reportedly due to the failure of the new Palestinian government to submit to the three conditions imposed by the Quartet. The Quartet, made up of the USA, the UN, the EU and Russia, had called on the Hamas-led government to recognize Israel, to accept previously signed agreements between the PLO and Israel and to renounce terrorism.

Palestinians complained that the international community had unjustly imposed an economic siege simply because they were not happy with the free and fair elections in the Palestinian territories. The elections, supervised by international observers headed by former US President Jimmy Carter, had resulted in the overwhelming victory of supporters of the Hamas Islamic movement. The government created after the January 2006 elections has been unable to pay civil servants because of the international banking blockade and the refusal of Israel to transfer to its account tens of millions of tax dollars collected by the occupying power on behalf of the Palestinian people.

After months without pay, the government headed by Hamas's Ismael Haniyeh was confronted with a serious challenge in September 2006, when civil servants went on strike demanding to be paid. The differences between the Fatah-led Presidency of Mahmoud Abbas and the Islamist government spilled into the streets. The threats by President Abbas to hold elections to resolve the deadlock seemed to pour oil on the fire.

With unemployment rising, income dropping to record low levels, and internal tensions escalating, the internal Palestinian fibre began to disintegrate, dipping into

internal fighting between Palestinians supporting either Hamas or Fatah. Attempts to reconcile the warring groups took place in Gaza, and then moved to Egypt, to Damascus, and finally bore fruit in Mecca under the aegis of the Saudi pro-US King Abdallah, whose country has been a financial backer of the Palestinians for decades.

The challenge now is to find a way to get beyond simply ending the internal fighting through the creation of a national unity government. One of the first challenges for the new government is to convince the international community that this new government respects previous Palestinian agreements. This includes the PLO-Israel mutual recognition and the Oslo accords. By announcing the acceptance of previous agreements and supporting the Arab peace initiative, the new government should be able to bring economic normality to the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority. The newly established national unity government had another daunting challenge ahead of it. If the scenes of internal killings and property destruction are not to be repeated, a new overall internal security policy needs to be implemented. The numerous militias, groups, gangs and individuals owning and using arms are dangerous. The new unity government should have insisted on the need for a single and united armed force. In order to end lawlessness the Palestinian security leadership will need to lift the protection given to armed individuals who have been using their weapons with impunity to injure, kill and destroy property. Law and order needs to be the mantra of the unity government if Palestinian leaders from all factions expect the pessimistic Palestinian public to have faith in them again.

When the reconciliation between the leaders of the two major Palestinian groups, Hamas and Fatah, that has just been negotiated in Saudi Arabia, was signed, it was hailed as a major political breakthrough, but there was clearly trouble ahead. The national unity government created as a result of this agreement faced many daunting challenges. The agreement needed to be followed by an effort to end the economic and administrative siege of Palestine, as well as serious peace talks with Israel aimed at ending the 39-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. At home, the new government needs to pay its civil servants, restore law and order, and end the chaos that has become the norm in the Palestinian territories. The national unity did not last very long. By June 2007 the fighting had not only resurfaced but had resulted in a clear military victory for the Hamas militias.

The national security forces loyal to the Palestinian President were routed and had to flee to Egypt and to the West Bank via Israel. Hamas declared their own separatist government headed by the leader of their parliamentary list, Ismael Haniyeh. President Abbas declared the actions a coup and an illegal revolt against the legitimate government, and has cut off all ties with Hamas and its government since. While public servants are still being paid by Abbas from Ramallah, the legal and administrative situation is very messy. The world has refused to recognize the Hamas government in Gaza although Egypt has continued a dialogue with the aim of working out modalities for a solution with Fatah as well as a cease-fire with Israel, where the two sides are trading do-it-yourself rockets on the one side and helicopter missiles from the Israeli side.

The past two years have been among the most difficult years in modern Palestinian history. For years, the world envied the Palestinian people's strong social fibre, as they held together despite the occupation. With a strong sense of national identity, Palestinians boasted that they had a clear unifying purpose: ending the Israeli occupation and establishing an independent and democratic state.

But the infighting has left a deep wound among the Palestinians. If that wound is to heal, much effort must be exerted to restore a functioning economy, strengthen internal security, and improve Palestinians' relations with their neighbours and the international community.

The story of the family of Ayman Bardawil is a telling one. "Sometimes when I call her she asks me what I am still doing here," he says about his mother. Shortly after the end of the internal conflict she was very worried. Even though the situation appeared quiet with no-one left for the victorious Hamas militants to fight, the pleas of Ayman's mother to leave Gaza are getting louder. Her son is a political leader with Fatah and while he is able to continue his political activity, the mother doesn't trust the present quiet that Gaza is enjoying now and is worried about the long-term future of living in Gaza. Mrs. Bardawil's apprehensions are not unique.

For now, families like the Bardawils who are unable to emigrate are hoping that the present one-party control will not last very long. Once multi-party rule returns to Gaza, they hope that the genuine rule of law and democratic principles will replace the rule of the gun and thus allow a true return of power to the source of power, the people.