

Palestine: Inching towards implosion

Sunday 31 December 2006, by [AMAYREH Khaled](#) (Date first published: 28 December 2006).

With thousands of Palestinians facing starvation, Fatah and Hamas increasingly fought one another in 2006, with the spectre of mass civil strife looming at every turn, writes Khaled Amayreh from occupied Palestine

It is doubtless that 2006 will be viewed by historians as one of the most tumultuous years in the annals of Palestinian history.

On 25 January, legislative elections in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem finally took place after a series of postponements and delays by the Fatah leadership, mainly due to worries that the erstwhile Palestinian Authority (PA) ruling party was not sufficiently prepared for the polls.

The elections were monitored by hundreds of foreign observers, including former US president Jimmy Carter, who testified to their fairness, transparency and democratic nature.

The results of the elections showed that Fatah's fears were vindicated. Hamas won 75 seats of the 132 making up the Palestinian Legislative Council, with Fatah taking only 47, the remainder going to a few independents and a number of small leftist, liberal and secular parties. For Fatah, the outcome represented a humiliating defeat for a movement that ever since its inception in 1965 viewed itself as embodying the hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian people for freedom and liberation.

Hence, Fatah found it difficult to accept the results, despite public utterances to the contrary. Hamas also seemed to have outperformed itself; never having imagined it would win so many seats. The big gain for Hamas presented a real challenge to what remained essentially a resistance movement that had few connections.

Having won the trust of the people, the Hamas leadership — especially in the Gaza Strip where the Israeli army had withdrawn but retained control over Gaza's skies, waters and border-crossings — made strenuous efforts to get Fatah and other Palestinian factions to join a Hamas-led "national unity government". Fatah did engage in talks with Hamas, but it was clear from the beginning that it had taken a decision not to be a junior partner in any government dominated by Hamas.

This boycotting of government, widely believed to have been the result of US pressure, eventually forced Hamas to form its own government, headed by Ismail Haniyeh. Hamas rightly thought that the main base of government would have to be in the Gaza Strip, not Ramallah as was traditionally the case, since the Israeli occupation army could arrest the prime minister, the foreign minister and the interior minister were they to be based in the West Bank.

Hamas's calculations proved more than accurate. As soon as the government was formed and started functioning, the Israeli army declared war on it, including rounding-up newly-elected Islamist lawmakers, raiding Hamas offices and later detaining as hostages central political figures in the new government, including Aziz Duwaik, the moderate speaker of the Palestinian parliament, Deputy Prime Minister Nasseruddin Al-Shaer, as well as nine other cabinet ministers and 30 other

lawmakers based in the West Bank. The bulk of these officials remain hostage in Israel, mostly without charge or trial.

Israel also stopped the transfer to the PA of the estimated \$55 million that it levies every month on Palestinian imports destined to the West Bank and Gaza Strip and that pass through Israeli seaports, thus depriving the Palestinian government of nearly 40 per cent of its financial revenues.

In addition, Israel, wielding its immense influence within the West, pressured the US and EU to impose a harsh and open-ended financial blockade on the PA. The US and EU not only severed all forms of direct and indirect financial aid to the new government but also threatened to blacklist any bank, including Palestinian banks, involved in financial dealings with the government.

This hermetic blockade, coupled with wave after wave of psychological war on Hamas, crippled the government's ability to pay salaries for the estimated 165,000 civil servants and public employees, including more than 60,000 security officers and policemen who are mostly loyal to Fatah. In waging war on the Hamas government, Israel effectively punished collectively the nearly four million Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, pushing tens of thousands of impoverished Palestinian families to the brink of starvation.

Facing this unrelenting siege, the Hamas-led government resorted to austerity measures, including cuts on public spending, in order to save as much money as possible to pay the salaries of civil servants. It was clear from the beginning, however, that even the most effective austerity measures would not suffice to solve the problem. Eventually, government officials and ministers were sent on missions to the capitals of sympathetic Arab and Muslim countries where they succeeded in obtaining some funds.

The Arab League also allocated a monthly sum of \$55 million to alleviate Palestinian suffering, but payment didn't assume regular frequency.

Bringing cash funds into the occupied territories proved difficult. With local and regional banks, fearing American sanctions, refusing to transfer Arab and Islamic aid funds to the occupied territories, government officials were forced to resort to primitive and desperate means of transferring money, mainly by packing millions of dollars into suitcases and carrying them into Gaza via the Rafah border crossing. It is believed that \$70 million was brought into Gaza this way.

Having failed to vanquish the Hamas-led government by financial sanctions, Israel eventually resorted to deadly, murderous attacks and forays into the Gaza Strip, killing and maiming hundreds of Palestinian civilians.

Indeed, Israeli attacks assumed an audacity unknown for many years, including the extermination of entire Palestinian families, either by bombing their homes in the middle of the night or annihilating them while picnicking along the Gaza shore (as happened to the Ghalya family).

The pornographic killings of Palestinian civilians contributed to the escalation of Palestinian resistance, including the firing of homemade Qassam projectiles on nearby Jewish settlements. While these makeshift "rockets" inflicted few casualties on the Israeli side, they caused much anxiety and panic among Jewish settlers who constantly pressured their government to "destroy Gaza".

On 25 June, Palestinian resistance fighters carried out a daring raid against Israeli military installations near Rafah, killing two Israeli soldiers and capturing one. The operation infuriated the Israeli government, which viewed it as "violating the rules of the game", threatening to wage open war on Gaza aimed at forcing the Palestinians to free the captured soldier.

The threats were carried out immediately, with Israeli warplanes bombing colleges, schools, streets and government buildings across the Gaza Strip, along with Gaza's sole power station. As usual, the US stood firmly behind Israel, blaming the Palestinians for provoking the Zionist state.

The blitz lasted for several weeks and was only halted temporarily when the Israeli army launched another war in the north against Hizbullah. The Gaza campaign left more than 500 Palestinians dead and thousands maimed and injured. Israel lost two soldiers. Neither was the captured soldier freed nor was the firing of Qassam shells stopped.

Eventually, the Israeli army decided on a deep incursion into northern Gaza, killing numerous more Palestinians, mostly civilians. At one point the Israeli army fired heavy artillery shells on residential homes in the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun, killing 18 sleeping women and children. Israel claimed the shelling a mistake, but Palestinians and human rights groups accused Israel of lying, arguing that Israel and everyone knew that shelling heavily populated neighbourhoods with tank artillery would result in a massacre.

The Arab League went to the UN Security Council to complain, but the US, Israel's guardian ally, used its veto power to strangle a resolution that would have condemned the Israeli crime.

Following the Beit Hanoun massacre on 18 November, regional and international efforts to reach a ceasefire bore fruit when Israel and Palestinian resistance factions agreed to a de facto ceasefire. Israel, however, refused to extend the ceasefire to the West Bank, insisting on carrying out nearly daily assassinations of Palestinian civilians and activists, all under the rubric of fighting terror.

This brazenness proved too provocative to Palestinian resistance factions who demanded a comprehensive ceasefire or none at all. As this piece was being prepared, the Islamic Jihad resistance group was firing Qassam shells on the Israeli settlement of Sderot near Gaza. The firing came two days after Israel murdered three Palestinians — a schoolgirl walking by the separation wall near Jenin and two Islamic Jihad activists in the northern West Bank.

Unmitigated Israeli aggression seemed to have convinced both Hamas and Fatah to work towards the creation of a government of national unity pursuant to the so-called National Accord Document based on the Prisoners' Document compiled in early summer by Palestinian political leaders in Israeli jails. Differences, however, over who would occupy which portfolio eventually caused the talks to collapse, prompting Fatah to accuse Hamas of adopting rigid positions.

In December, Haniyeh embarked on a prolonged tour of Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East that took him to Egypt, Syria, Qatar, Bahrain, Iran and Sudan to enlist political and financial support. The tour was successful beyond all hope as the Palestinian premier succeeded in obtaining pledges of support from Qatar and Iran exceeding hundreds of million dollars. This included a promise from the Emir of Qatar to pay the salaries of some 40,000 Palestinian teachers for six months. A similar promise from Iran covered the salaries of tens of thousands of Palestinian civil servants.

The resounding success of the visit was not well received by the US, Israel nor Fatah. While Haniyeh was abroad in Sudan, violence broke out in Gaza, and when Haniyeh himself arrived at the Rafah crossing on his way home he was held up by Israel on the Egyptian side for eight hours (the Americans say Israel did so on instructions from PA President Mahmoud Abbas).

The humiliating measure was taken allegedly in order to prevent the "smuggling" of some \$35 million dollars in suitcases Haniyeh was carrying into Gaza. Haniyeh was eventually allowed to return to Gaza, but without the funds.

The story didn't end there. As Haniyeh was returning to Gaza, unknown gunmen (Hamas says Fatah gunmen affiliated with pro-American Gaza strongman Mohammed Dahlan) fired on Haniyeh's motorcade, killing a bodyguard and lightly injuring his son as well as his advisor, Ahmed Yousuf. The "assassination attempt" infuriated Haniyeh who vowed to "deal properly" with those who tried to kill him.

On Friday 15 December, Haniyeh called for national unity, telling more than a 100,000 supporters in Gaza that Palestinians ought to unite in the face of Israel, not fight each other. At the time, Fatah policemen, poorly trained and indoctrinated against Hamas, ganged up on a peaceful Hamas rally in the streets of Ramallah, injured more than 33, including three youngsters who sustained serious injuries.

The next day, Saturday 16 December, PA President Abbas delivered a speech before Fatah leaders and officials in Ramallah in which he called for early presidential and legislative elections. Abbas castigated and ridiculed Hamas, blaming its government for the eight-month siege and also for the weakening of the Palestinian cause on the international arena.

The call, unconstitutional pursuant to Palestinian Basic Law, was rejected by Hamas leaders who accused Abbas of following an American agenda not the Palestinian peoples' agenda. Recriminations and counter-recriminations eventually echoed in the streets in Gaza in the form of flying bullets between Fatah and Hamas militias, leaving at least 18 people from both sides as well as civilians dead.

On 19 December, Egyptian mediators, after making exhaustive efforts, were able to secure an end to fighting between the two groups. At time of writing, the ceasefire, though fragile, was holding. Fears are, however, that unless the two sides, Fatah and Hamas, reach a political accord sooner rather than later the violence and bloodshed could spill over into a wider internal war.

P.S.

*Originally published in al- Ahram Weekly, Cairo, Issue No 826, 28 december 2006- 3 january 2007.