

SOS from Palestine

Sunday 20 May 2007, by [AMAYREH Khaled](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2007).

Gaza is on the verge of explosion once again as internecine fighting between Hamas and Fatah continues, reports Khaled AmayrehM from East Jerusalem

As inter-Palestinian fighting in Gaza entered its fourth day, Israeli aircraft targeted the southern town of Rafah with missiles, killing four Hamas members and wounding at least 20 people on Wednesday.

A surprise ceasefire agreement between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal, concluded over the phone, was announced the same day. It is the second ceasefire agreement between Fatah and Hamas in a week.

The agreement, which many assume will last only a few hours, did not prevent Palestinian Deputy Prime Minister Azzam Al-Ahmed from urging Abbas to declare martial law in an attempt to contain the violence. According to Al-Ahmed, Abbas is considering the proposal.

Palestinian law allows the president to declare a state of emergency for up to 30 days after which it can be extended only with the approval of the Hamas-dominated legislative council.

Following the eruption of factional violence in Gaza earlier this week Palestinian political leaders appealed to Arab states, particularly Egypt, to make more intensive efforts to stop the infighting from spiralling out of control

The confrontation, the bloodiest since the signing of the Saudi-brokered Mecca Accords on 8 February, has claimed more than 28 lives, and the death toll is expected to rise as the shooting continues.

Ahmed Youssef, political adviser to Prime Minister, told Al-Ahram Weekly he hoped “brotherly Arab countries” would take “serious and proactive steps to stop this madness”.

Youssef thanked Egypt for “its strenuous efforts” to end the confrontation but admitted that unless the Palestinians displayed the will to help themselves any mediation effort was destined to fail.

The main problem, he said, was the inability of both Fatah and Hamas “to control their men in the streets”.

As the Weekly went to press gunmen from both Hamas and Fatah were shooting at each other in Gaza, forcing most of the city’s population to remain indoors for their own safety.

Politicians from both sides agreed to a ceasefire late Tuesday night, following intensive Egyptian mediation. The agreement stipulated the withdrawal of all “armed elements from the streets” and the release of all abductees. Less than two hours later the ceasefire collapsed when masked gunmen — accused by some Palestinian officials of being Israeli agents — resumed shooting.

Earlier, on Tuesday morning, unknown gunmen had opened fire at an Egyptian mediator as he was inspecting the streets in downtown Gaza, accompanied by PA spokesman Ghazi Hamad and several other officials. He sustained slight injuries to his hand.

At around the same time, militiamen affiliated with Hamas attacked the home of Gaza Preventive Security Chief Rashid Abu Shbak, killing five of his bodyguards. Abu Shbak was not home when the attack occurred.

Hamas's Ezzeddin Al-Qassam Brigades have accused Abu Shbak of masterminding the assassination of several Hamas members, including its field commander, as well as organising death squads.

The attack on Abu Shbak's home infuriated Fatah spokesman Abdul-Hakim Awad, who in turn pointed an accusing finger at the Hamas political leadership.

"All [Hamas] are killers from top to bottom, they are all implicated," he said.

The worst incident in the latest round of infighting also occurred Tuesday morning when anonymous gunmen attacked a Presidential Guard vehicle carrying a dozen Fatah security personnel near the Mintar border crossing with Israel. Eight people were killed. Nearby Israeli soldiers opened fire on two gunmen as they were fleeing the scene, killing one and injuring the other. Hamas denied any link with the attack and accused the Israeli army of being responsible. Fatah blamed the ambush on Hamas.

Palestinian observers speaking to the Weekly attribute the infighting — which forced Interior Minister Hani Al-Qawasmeh to resign on Sunday — to three factors. First is the inability of Hamas's and Fatah's leaders to control their respective military wings, largely made up of young, inexperienced and undisciplined trigger-happy men. The repeated collapse of ceasefire agreements reached between the two sides over recent months supports such a view.

But the situation is complicated by the overlap between factional and tribal concerns. Clans, many of which have their own militias, often carry out revenge killings, which draw factions into fresh clashes.

Then there is Israel, which has a vested interest, fuelled by political and propaganda considerations, in pushing Gaza into civil war. Israeli tactics have increasingly been to use Palestinian infighting as a smokescreen to evade any serious peace process that would involve Israel giving up the spoils of the 1967 War.

Israel's siege of Gaza, which has involved the confiscation of almost 50 per cent of Palestinian tax revenues, has been aided and abetted by Washington's blockade of the present government. The result has been to turn Gaza into a pressure cooker on the verge of explosion, with the Palestinian authorities unable to meet the basic needs of the population, be that paying employees their salaries or protecting them from Israel's attempts at ethnic cleansing.

There are proposals to rectify the situation before it is too late but they involve dissolving all Oslo-era security agencies (Fatah), as well as Hamas's more recent Executive Force, pending the creation of a national security force representing all Palestinians. Such a proposal, however, looks more and more impractical as it becomes increasingly clear that neither Hamas nor Fatah are capable of controlling their armed wings.

The renewal of factional fighting between Fatah and Hamas, which coincides with the 59th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba, looks set to continue to cast a heavy shadow over the daily lives of Palestinians.

P.S.

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